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PRAIRIE FIRE BOSS by WALT COBURN

WHEN THE GUN-PACK TURNS! by ROE RICHMOND

ROAN COLTER LUTZ ROBBINS AND OTHERS!

JAN. 1949

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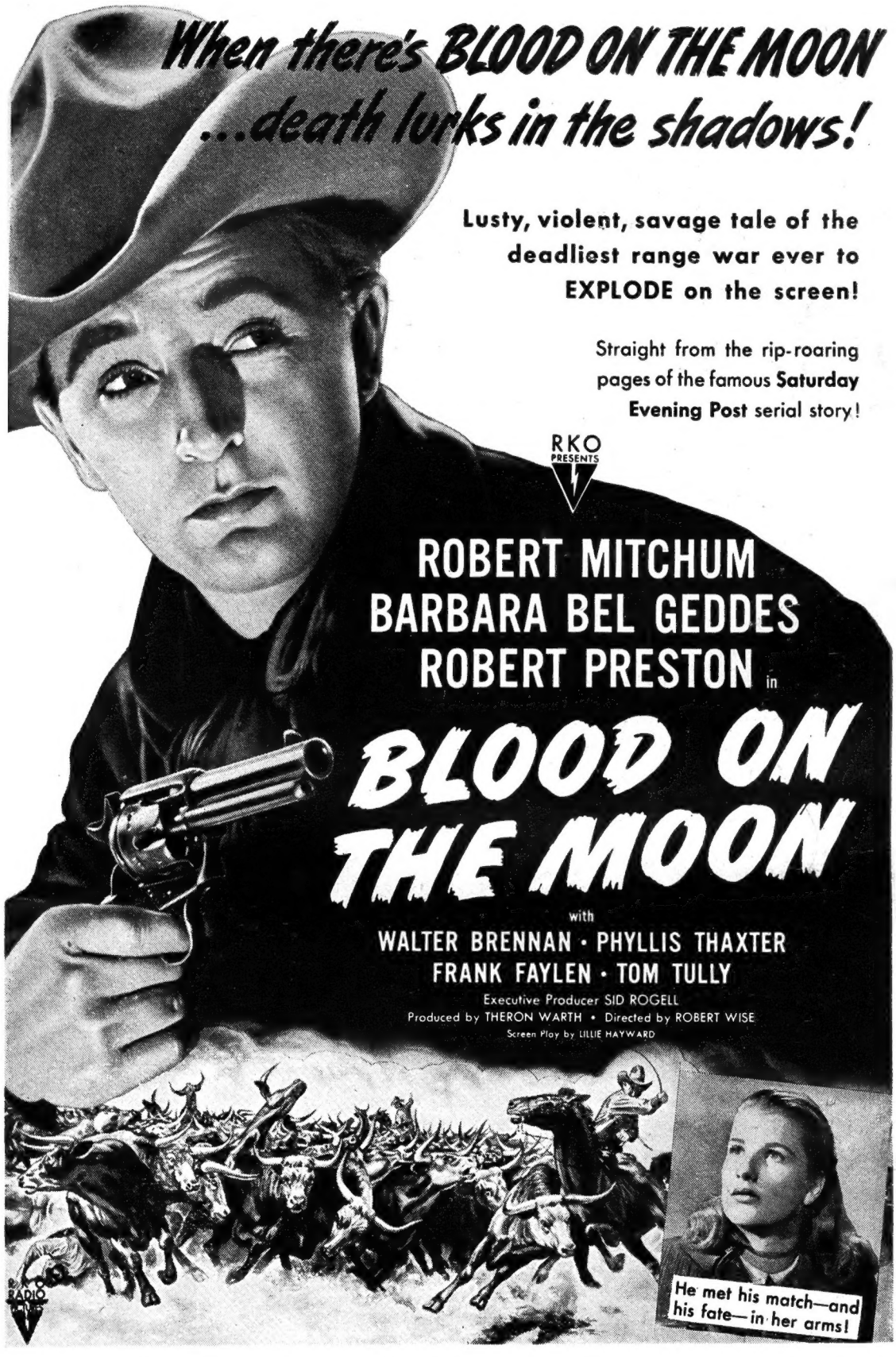
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WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
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Ace-High WESTERN STORIES

Vol. XX, No. 4 CONTENTS January, 1949

Two Smashing Full-Length Novels

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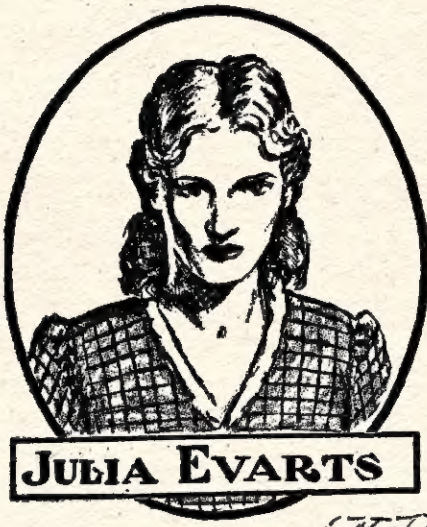
SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER



JULIA EVARTS

1

Julia Evarts, the "Angel of Frye's Creek," who served for many years as a sort of official hostess of the Dakota country, began her strange career of public service the day her husband, Jim, was killed by a stray Indian arrow. Instead of giving up and going home, this 22-year-old pioneer woman stayed on and proved up on her own homestead. But that was not enough. She needed, she said, a reason to live. And there, in the barren Frye's Creek country, she dedicated herself to making frontier life easier for other women.

2

Every Conestoga wagon that stopped within twenty miles was met by Julia Evarts, driving a cart loaded with a smoking hot meal, dry blankets, and fresh water. She did laundry, tended children while their mothers worked and performed a hundred blessed little favors that gave tired, defeated women the courage to go on.

3

In the fall of 1862, she was sitting at a neighbor's fireside working on a patchwork quilt when an Indian war party trooped into the front yard. Mrs. Evarts thrust her frightened friend and the children into a corner closet. Then, snatching up a long rifle, she put it through a knothole and blazed away.

4

At the same time, she threw a handful of bullets on the hot coals. They went off in a popping fusillade up the chimney. The Indians, thinking there were at least ten armed men inside the house, hastily rode off. Mrs. Evarts coolly took the scalp of the one she had killed and it hung in her own doorway until the day she died at the age of 71.

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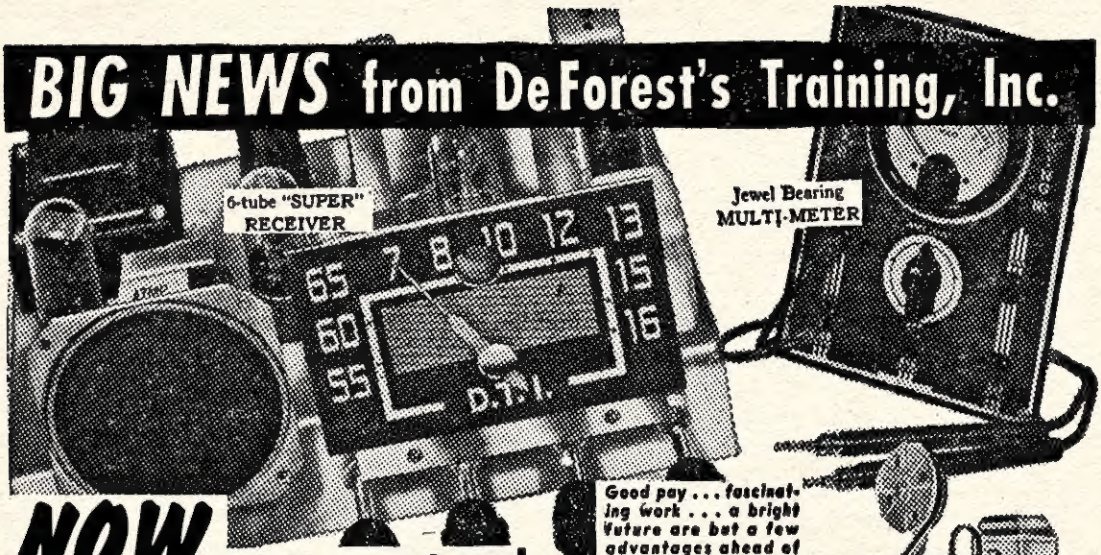

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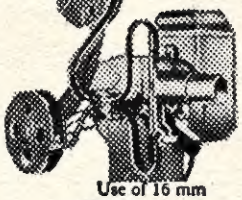

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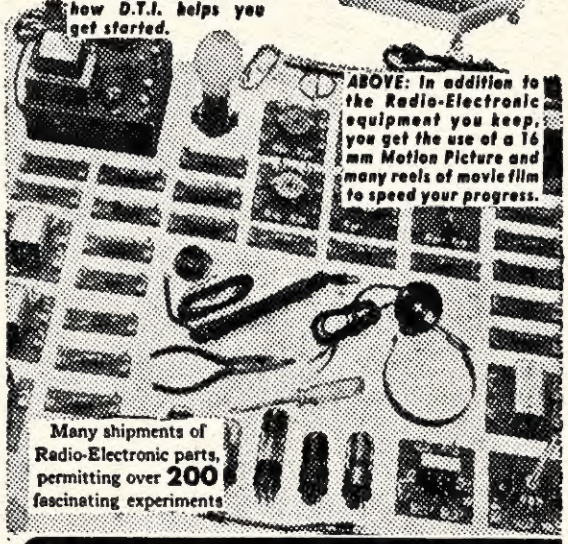

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PRAIRIE FIRE

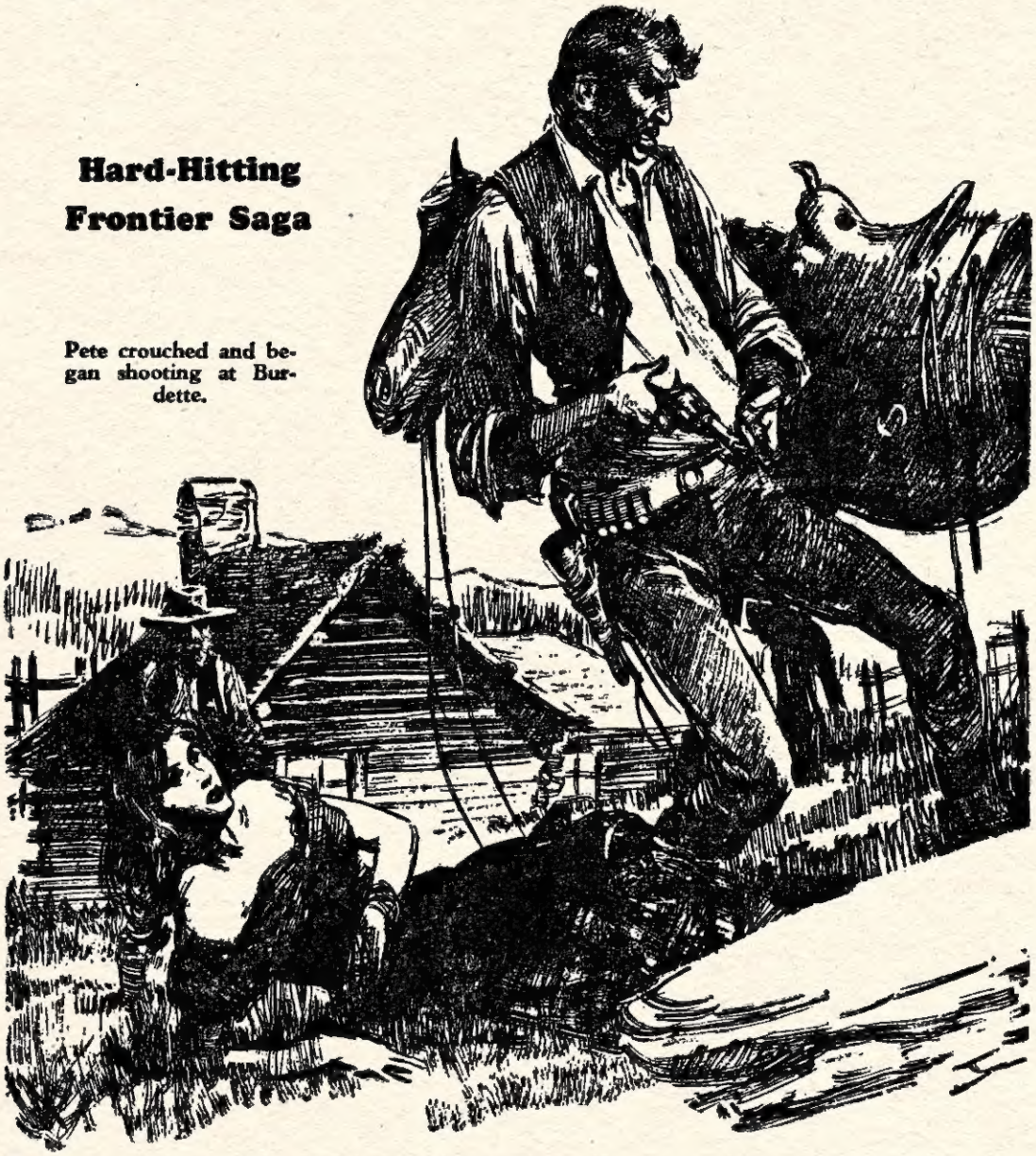
CHAPTER ONE

Hell Fire!

IT WAS the fall of the year, just after the first beef shipment, and the roundup had pulled back to the far end of the Three Bars range.

One of those occasional strong Montana winds was blowing and the small beef herd was hard to hold and would not bed down. It was about third guard time.

Hard-Hitting Frontier Saga



Pete crouched and began shooting at Burdette.

BOSS

By WALT COBURN

Burdette's second shot whined past Pete's head.

How could Pete Wiley leave his murdered brother to his last troubled rest beneath that strife-torn range . . . before Pete wiped out the stink of sheep with gunsmoke, and quenched the blazing grass with blood?

Burdette picked a place about five miles away from the roundup camp. He rode off into the coulee where the dry buckbrush grew and rolled a cigarette and cupped the match flame in his hand. Hate showed in his eyes, green as bottle glass, and in his tight grin. Without dismounting, he dropped the burning match into the dry buckbrush and watched the flame set fire to the tinder-dry brush.

He pulled the cigarette smoke deep into his lungs, eyeing the tiny flame kindle and the wind-fanned blaze increase and spread with a crackling sound. He lifted his gaze in the direction of the distant cow camp and the outfit he hated. His grin flattened. The fire caught a denser patch of brush and the flames shot up like a rocket. Somebody on guard would be bound to sight it. He pictured the wild shout in the night, the herd turned loose, every man in camp roused. There'd be wild confusion as men pawed the sleep out of their eyes and pulled on their boots, running towards their night horses. Grabbing gunnysacks and slikers, anything handy. Leaving the nighthawk and horse wrangler and cook to hook up teams to fetch the water barrels.

He could almost hear the shouted orders of the wagon Boss Pete Wiley, hollering profanely in the night.

"Prairie Fire! Dip them sacks in the crick! Ride scattered, and leave your horses where they won't git ketched in the fire. All the green hands stay close to the old hands at the fire fightin! Git goin', fore the whole range is afire!"

Burdette hated to leave, hated to tear himself away. He'd miss half the show by not staying to see Pete Wiley, wagon boss of the Three Bars, fighting to save what didn't belong to him. High-chinned Pete Wiley! And them common, forty-a-month Three Bars cowhands sweating their hearts out on foot, swinging wet sacks and saddle slickers to beat the fire down, scorching their boots and chaps that the cheap two bit outfit was too damned stingy to replace. Earn your forty a month you common cowhand, sweating and blowing your heart out and no thanks and it's all in a day's work. . . .

Burdette had fetched some coal oil in an empty whiskey bottle along with a pocketful of torn rags. Just for good measure he poured the kerosene on the rags and lit 'em with a match and tossed 'em into the fire. Then he dropped two of the unlighted coal oil rags behind the fire, where Wiley would be sure to find 'em, and poured all but an inch of the coal oil out onto the ground. Corking the bottle, he tossed it, as if dropped by accident, behind the line of wind-swept prairie fire. . . .

"And then let the sheep outfit take the blame. . . . The Ben Landis sheep outfit. . . ."

It was time to haul freight and drift yonderly. He hated shore enough to miss the best part of the show, but in his calculations it was time to get to hell and gone.

HE RODE back to the stage road. He had barely reached it when some horsebacker coming from town rode up, his horse spurred to a high lope.

Burdette slid his six-shooter from its holster, holding it down and out of sight.

"Fire!" he yelled harshly. "Prairie fire!" Burdette kept back a chuckle from his voice.

Burdette had to kill this man. Sweat glistened on his face and from under his low-pulled hat his sweat sodden hair made a trickle down his face.

The rider met him face to face, and drunk as he was he recognized Burdette.

Pete Wiley had a younger brother Phil. Wild Phil Wiley rode the rough string for the Three Bars. Wild hell-raising young Wild Phil. Nothing vicious or mean about Phil. He bucked his horse down the street and into the saloons.

Matched fights for the plain hell of it and shook hands win or lose and the loser bought the drinks. And there was one man whom he always fought on sight and that was Bob Landis and they never shook hands. They fought because Bob Landis was a sheepman and Wild Phil rode the rough string for the Three Bars.

"Burdette!" Wild Phil Wiley was sobered by the sight of the prairie fire. "You dirty low down—You set fire to the Three Bars range!"

Phil Wiley clawed for his sixshooter. He'd voiced his death sentence. Burdette let Phil Wiley get his hand on his gun, then he gut-shot him. And when he doubled over he shot him through the head. His green eyes watched him topple over and his spooked bronc whirl and pitch. Phil's foot hung in the stirrup and he was dragged about a hundred feet before the bronc kicked him loose.

Burdette sat his horse, ejecting the empty shells from his gun, a wicked grin on his face. Shoving two fresh cartridges into the gun, he cocked his head sideways, listening to the last far flung echoes of the gun.

"That," Burdette grinned, "squares that. . . ."

Then Burdette spurred his horse to a high run and rode that way for a mile or two, before he slacked his blowing horse to a slow trot that he kept up until he had put miles between him and the prairie fire.

It was in the dark hour before daybreak when he rode into the nester ranch that belonged to Sam Johns and turned loose his horse. It was one of Sam Johns' horses that he had ridden.

The Whiskey Ranch. That was what they called the Sam Johns place. Sam had a little bunch of cattle, but he made more money stilling good corn whiskey. He peddled it by the bottle and jug. And now and then he took a few kegs to town to peddle to the saloons. Injun whiskey. Good enough for the sheepherder trade.

Sam Johns was asleep at the house, where he lived with his missus and his daughter Rose.

It was to the bunkhouse where Jimmy Johns slept and where Burdette had spread his roundup bed on the extra bunk, that Burdette went. Jimmy Johns was sleeping off a jag. A jag that Burdette had joined in, with the pretence of taking drink for drink with Sam and Jimmy Johns until the whiskey peddler had reeled off to his cabin about nine o'clock, and until Jimmy had sprawled senseless about an hour later.

Burdette shed his boots and clothes and lighted a candle. He shook Jimmy Johns awake.

"Wake up, Jimmy. Wake up long enough to tell a man where you got another jug hid out. Empty! That damn crock's empty, and I got the shakes . . . need a drink."

JIMMY JOHNS was about twenty one. He woke up sick, cursing. He wanted to be tough, and he was about half-way tough. Dizzy and sick as he was, he came out of it fighting. Then the green eyes of Burdette sobered him. He was scared of the man.

"Old Man Sam keeps it at his house. Go chargin' in there, Old Man Sam'll shore be on the prod. Can't you wait till daylight. . . ?"

"I got money to pay for it. Wait till I put on my pants and boots. Sam Johns pokered me out of my money, drunk as I was. But I still got jug money left. It cost me better'n a hundred dollars to spend the night here. A man's entitled to a drink in the morning."

It was what Burdette wanted for an alibi. Jimmy Johns would have to wake Sam Johns. And that would wake up his missus . . . . and his cussing around would wake up Rose. . . .

Sam Johns was a mild mannered, al-

most hen-pecked man. He took it all out in cussing. His cussing woke up his missus.

"Burdette come awake with the shakes," Jimmy said. "He's got money left. Tell me where the cache is."

"I'll tell you nothing, you whiskey thief." He blinked his eyes and raised his voice.

"Rose!" Sam Johns bellowed. "Rose. Fetch a gallon. And get the dough."

Rose came out of her bedroom, a wrapper tied around her middle, a jug in her hand.

Rose Johns was by far the prettiest girl in the cow country. She got her looks from her half-breed mother. Her blue-black hair was braided squaw style. Her skin was olive, and eyes were slate gray.

She walked over to where Burdette stood, and held out the gallon jug. Her eyes looked into Burdette and through him. He stiffened under her stare, and tried not to flinch.

"Shakes?" Rose Johns put contempt into her voice. "Cash on the barrelhead." She set the jug on the kitchen table.

Burdette laid a twenty dollar bill alongside it, and picked up the jug.

"Sorry I woke you up, so keep the change. Buy yourself a new dress." He reached for the jug, and turned away.

"You didn't wake me up."

Something in her tone whirled him around. Her smile never reached her eyes. She took a ten and a five dollar bill and walked over to him.

"The price," she said flatly, "is five dollars. And," she added, "I buy my own clothes. You better be careful," she added in a low tone. "Your clothes stink of coal oil." She met his gaze levelly, and her eyes dropped to his unsteady grip on the jug.

"Shakes. . . . Better not drop that jug. Jimmy, take Burdette back with you to the bunk house."

Her slate-gray eyes followed them out the door. She shut it behind them, and watched them from the dark window. Her brother Jimmy was lurching and weaving. The gait of the tall, broad shouldered Burdette was cold sober. Her eyes narrowed. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

First Dead Man

PRAIRIE FIRE! That common enemy to all livestock men was a common leveler. Feuds and quarrels and hatreds were forgotten. All boundary lines came down. Not because the wind may change. Nothing like that. Grass is a precious thing. And to fight the enemy, all men within sight of the smoke will drop everything and ride to the fire, hatreds laid aside until that fire is licked. . . .

Pete Wiley, ramrod and wagon boss for the big Three Bars outfit, had come awake when the call came for third guard time. The rider who had ridden in from the herd had called the two men to go on third guard.

"They ain't a-layin' worth a damn. Rattle yore hocks and git out yonder or you'll never find the herd."

Pete Wiley went out with the third guard. A big tow-headed, blue-eyed man, easy going till you crossed him. A good, all around cowman and an easy wagon boss to work for. Slow to anger, easy and joshing and soft-spoken.

Pete Wiley was out there on third guard when the wind whipped the fire into sight.

"Turn 'em loose!" His voice lifted to a quick shout. "Fire!"

He sent the two men on guard to fight the fire, and told them what to do.

"Get in back of the fire line. Use your chaps and saddle blankets. Make almighty certain that them horses you leave on the burnt side don't git ketched by the fire. Do the best you kin till we git there.

Don't bother wastin' time fightin' it in the coulees where the brush is thick. Let the buckbrush in the coulees burn itself out. Whip 'er where she starts a-licking up the side, and watch that you don't git trapped. . . ."

Pete Wiley headed back for the wagons at a run. When he was within earshot, he jerked his gun and emptied it at the sky. And by the time he had ridden up to camp, every cowpuncher was awake. They had sighted the fire. They were waiting, tightening saddle cinches.

The jangle of horse bells sounded as the nighthawk fetched in the remuda. Wiley shouted orders.

"Git gunny sacks." He was on the ground beside his bed, yanking off blankets and ripping them to strips.

"Wet 'em. Fill the water barrels and put 'em on the bed-wagon. The cook and the horse wrangler will drive. Throw sacks and blankets and tarps in the wagon. The nighthawk drift that cavvy yonderly. Hook a team to the chuck wagon and haul tail outa here. With that wind fer a tail she's bound to reach camp."

Back at the fire line, Pete Wiley scattered his men. He was an old hand at prairie fire fighting. He had heard the two shots as he rode up without paying any attention to them. Fighting fire is a tricky business. A man can wear himself out where it is useless. Pete rode in and out, directing the fire fighters. Telling one man to slow down and take it easy or he'd drop in his tracks. Pulling a man or two away from where it was worse than useless, and moving them to where they could do some good. Watching men and horses. He had to lead out three saddle horses that would have been trapped. And when the bed wagon rolled up, he piloted it to a burned-out strip and told them to stay there.

"Keep one barrel for drinkin' water."

He pulled half a dozen seasoned fire fighters off the fire line, and back almost a half mile and told them to stay there. He told them to start a backfire, one man riding back and forth with wet sacks and blankets.

"Don't tucker yourself plum out. Burn a strip and beat it out. Then burn another strip. And beat it out to the last spark. Watch fer cow chips. They hold the fire. That's the job for the shovel man."

Pete Wiley was sweating and smoke grimed. His teeth were bared now in a black, sweaty smudge.

"Swing that shovel," he grinned, "shore, it will put blisters on yore hands. Spit on the blisters and dig them cow chips under. Bimeby them blisters will callous. Got it?"

"Hell, you're talkin' to an old smoke eater. Wastin' your breath," grinned a grizzled cowhand. "I was fightin' prairie fires before you was born. Now git on to them green hands that needs your kindly advice."

It was heart-breaking, back-breaking work. Pete Wiley waited only long enough to see the back-fire started, then loped on back.

THE prairie fire sent an angry red glow skywards. Smoke billowed and stung his eyes. He rode so close that now and then a spark would hit and had to be slapped out with a gloved hand. Rabbits and other wild animals scurried, terrified, ahead. Sage hens and prairie chickens and curlew took wing. The cattle had drifted on ahead of the fire.

Dawn was breaking. The fire had jumped the back-fire and the half dozen men were fighting it and gradually getting the second fire whipped out.

Pete Wiley had sent the wagon back to fetch more water from the creek, and it had returned. The big tow-headed, smoke and sweat grimed ramrod had ridden up out of the fire-filled dawn to grab a drink of water.

He found half a dozen riders there.

Ben Landis and his son Bob, with four camp tenders. All of them with dripping wet sacks.

Ben Landis was big and tough and arrogant. A beefy man with layers of hard paunch, red-faced, with a shock of graying red hair. They said that Ben Landis could clean out a whole saloonful of men when he was on one of his tears. Burly, thick-chested, bull-necked, he was quiet enough when he was sober. But cunning and tricky and treacherous. He had been a cowpuncher and a good one. A good cowman. They said that he hated the sheep he had to handle, and the herders. But there was big money in sheep. And overnight he had moved in on the Three Bars range. With a land map, he had located men on homesteads, disregarding the agreement between the Three Bars and the Lazy L Landis ranges. Men like Burdette were placed on homesteads, men hand-picked for their toughness.

And then Ben Landis had shipped out his cattle and put in sheep. Sheeping 'em out. Trying to force the Three Bars into selling their cow outfit to Ben Landis at Ben Landis' own price. Crowding them, pushing them back on all sides. And not until Landis owned homesteads strategically on all four sides, did the Three Bars outfit wake up to the fact that their cow outfit was surrounded by sheep. Fifteen, twenty bands of sheep had moved in on the cow outfit. Each sheepherder had with him one or sometimes two heavily armed camp tenders hired at fighting wages.

Bob Landis was tall and slim and well schooled by his father. Dark red hair and with the same pale eyes of his father, he was an arrogant, quarrelsome, young man in his early twenties, who cut a handsome figure around town and at the dances and honkytonks.

Pete Wiley knuckled dirt and sweat from his bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes. He had his orders to keep out of trouble. But he had told Ben Landis to keep away from him, on the range or in town. The Three Bars was owned by a syndicate, called the Three Bars Land and Cattle Company, and Pete had always blamed them for letting a man as treacherous as Ben Landis get the jump on them. They were business men, dudes, who should have been up to date on land maps and water rights and things like that.

Now he eyed Ben and Bob Landis and their four gun-slingers with cold suspicion.

"We sighted your fire," said Ben Landis, "and come to tromp 'er out. We're a-takin' your orders."

"Yeah." Bob Landis put in his say so.

PETE WILEY looked hard at Bob Landis. One eye was puffed and discolored and his nose swollen and his lips cut and puffed. And without being told, Pete knew that Wild Phil Wiley had tangled in town with Bob Landis. Phil had been left behind in town when the wagon pulled out. He hadn't finished the town jag he was on, and Pete had long ago quit trying to get Wild Phil out of town. . . .

"You don't need guns to fight a fire. Leave them guns of yours in the bed wagon. Or your help ain't needed."

Ben Landis grinned flatly. "Leave your saddle guns at the wagon boys. Hell, you might as well ask them four gents to go barefooted as without their six-shooters." Ben Landis and Bob both had six-shooters buckled around their middles.

"Keep your six-shooters. And I'm obliged for your help."

"Don't bother with the thanks. If that fire gits outa control it might get over on the Landis land. Besides, I aim to git a-holt of the Three Bars soon."

"Anyhow," Bob Landis said. "I might run into Wild Phil. He jumped me when I was too drunk to handle myself. I done told him I was nowhere near finished. If

it's a gun fight he wants, it's a gun fight he'll git."

There was a promise, rather than any kind of a threat in the way Ben Landis said, "I aim to get a-holt of the Three Bars soon." In spite of the heat from the fire a chill ran along Pete's spine. That sheepman got what he went after. He broke no written laws of Montana. It was the unwritten laws that he violated, and he did it with ruthless contempt, hiring gun-slingers to back his deals. He had given orders to those tough gents not to violate the law, but to defend themselves. That checked the bet to the Three Bars. There was no law against running sheep; no law against men like Sam Johns and Burdette filing on homesteads, on land the Three Bars claimed for line camps but had neglected to get patented. . . . Ben Landis wasn't bluffing. He had the cards and the chips. . . .

Bob Landis was something of a range dude. His taste ran to fancy tailored pants and shirt and a big hat and a pearl handled six-shooter. Mebbyso he had a yellow streak. He won most of his fights when he had all the bulge. But he'd been licked. Every time he tangled with Phil he got the worst of it. But he was more afraid of Ben Landis than he was of any whipping that Wild Phil could give him, and Ben Landis told him that any time Phil Wiley wanted a fight to tackle him, regardless. And there was always the hope that Bob Landis could get Phil Wiley down when there would be no friend of Phil's around to pull him off. If ever that happened, he would kill Phil. . . .

At Ben Landis' order, the four gun slingers slid their saddle guns from their scabbards and laid them in the bed wagon.

"Like you said, Ben," Pete Wiley grinned, "you might soon own the Three Bars range. You're a-workin' fer your own interests. Have at it. Take your men and swing around the far end of the fire and set another back-fire. It's a shame to ruin them alligator boots and fancy duds, Bob. Charge it up against the price of owning the Three Bars."

Ben Landis knew a good man when he saw one. When he spoke he meant every word. "When I git a-holt of the Three Bars, Wiley, you kin name your wages for ramroddin' it." Ben Landis called his men to follow him. He had a wet gunny sack in each hand.

IT WAS when Pete Wiley rode up to the bunch of saddled Three Bars horses to change his played-out horse for a fresh mount, that he noticed Wild Phil's bronc among the others.

Then, Wild Phil must be back at the outfit, Pete thought. He hoped the darned fool would have sense enough to stick to the fire fighting and not tangle with Bob Landis. He changed horses and rode back to the grim job of directing the fire fighters.

There was no doubt about it. Ben Landis and Bob and the four hired gun-slingers were doing a good job of it. Ben Landis savvied how to fight fire. Above the crackling flames Pete could hear his bellowing voice driving his men, cussing Bob when he went to get a drink of water.

"You drank all the booze in town. Now you're hollerin' for water. Water'll give you a gut ache. Sweat 'er out! By the hell, you don't go doggin' 'er off a-cryin' fer water!"

The wind died down with the sunrise, and from then on they had the prairie fire licked. Only a few cow chips smoldered now, and that was a job for the shovel men.

Smoke-grimed, weary, blistered and singed, too played out to talk, they limped back to the barrels on the bed wagon to drink their fill and rinse out their mouths.

Ben Landis and his son Bob and the

four tough camp tenders came dragging their way to the wagon. Ben Landis' hair and eyebrows were singed and his beefy face almost purple. He had fought fire so close that there were burned spots on his sweat sodden shirt and pants, and his boots ruined. And he had prodded his son Bob harder than he dared crowd his hired hands. Bob's clothes were a mess and he looked played out.

A heavy smoke pall shrouded the sky and the sun was a red ball, when Pete Wiley rode up.

"We done got 'er licked." His voice had a croaking sound. Then he took tally of his men.

They were all there or accounted for. All but Phil. And now that he had time to think about it, he could not remember having sighted Phil or hearing him.

"Where's Phil?"

"Back havin' a beer in town," said a Three Bars cowhand. "That bronc stomper has all the luck."

"His bronc is here. In with the saddled horses. Bin there since about daybreak when Ben Landis showed up. He's bound to be here."

"Could be a-sleepin' off a jag."

"Could be he bucked off back yonder," was the more kindly suggestion, "and a-layin' back along the trail with mebbeso a busted leg."

"Anybody sighted Phil?" Pete Wiley said, looking now into the bloodshot eyes of Bob Landis. Bob Landis shook his head.

"Last I seen of Wild Phil," Bob Landis rinsed out his mouth with water and spat, "was in town yesterday."

"Phil's bronc is here," Pete said to another group of men. "Ain't anybody sighted him?" There was only a silence.

"I'll ride back along the stage road. Directly you git a drink and ketch your wind, fork your horses and cut fer sign."

Pete was worried. Phil never rode anything but a bronc. And a man on a bronc, even the best rider, can get into trouble, especially when the rider is drunk and working on a town bottle. He rode off.

Back up on the burned-out range, Pete Wiley sighted a bottle. A brown glass bottle. He peered into the brush, half expecting to see Phil drunk. Then he swung from his saddle, and picked up the bottle.

He pulled the cork and sniffed its content. Coal oil. He corked the bottle and shoved it into his pocket. Then he picked up a kerosene soaked rag. His jaws set and his narrowed eyes searched the ground. He was on foot now and leading his horse. Up on the stage road the glint of brass caught his eyes. He found the two empty cartridge shells and picked them up and shoved them into his pocket.

There were deeper horse tracks, like a horse pitching. He followed the tracks, dreading what he would find. There was a six-shooter half buried in the dirt. A wooden handled six-shooter that a shod hoof had struck and pounded into the dirt road.

A HUNDRED feet off the stage road, Pete Wiley came upon the dead body of his kid brother. Phil Wiley lay in that awkward dead position, on his back.

Pete stood looking down at him. He'd been gut-shot. Then shot through the head. He stood there a while, staring, dry-eyed, with his heart torn apart. Then he mounted his horse and rode slowly back to camp.

Four Three Bars cowboys were already in the saddle coming towards him.

"I found Phil," Pete Wiley said.

They did not question him. They saw the bleak look in his bloodshot blue eyes that forbade questioning. They followed in behind him as he rode to the wagon.

Ben Landis and his son and their camp tenders were mounted, ready to leave.

Pete Wiley reined up, hand on his gun. His bleak bloodshot blue eyes stared at Bob Landis.

"Phil Wiley," he croaked in a flat toned voice, "was murdered coming home from town, just after third guard time. I remember hearing the two shots."

His left hand pulled the whiskey bottle from his pocket. He held it in his hand.

"Coal oil," he said. "He rode up on the man who set the fire, and that man murdered him. Where were you, Bob, about third guard time last night?"

Pete Wiley had his hand on his six-shooter. Ready to kill him if Bob was unable to prove an alibi. And then he was remembering how he had emptied his gun at the sky to wake the roundup camp. He had forgotten to re-load the gun.

Ben Landis stiffened. His eyes narrowed and squinted. But he said no word; just stared at his son. Then he rode in between Pete Wiley and Bob.

"I don't believe it." Ben Landis spoke without bluster. "Bob is ornery and hell raisin' but he wouldn't set fire to range grass. Take it easy, Wiley. And I'll swear to you that if this whelp of mine set fire to good grass, or killed Phil, I'll whip the truth outa him, and turn him over to the law. You got the word of Ben Landis for it."

Then he turned on his son. "Tell the truth. If you lie by so much as one word I'll skin you alive. Where was you about third guard time. By the hell, you tell the truth!" His big fist clenched.

"All right. I rode to that old hay camp . . . to meet Rose Johns."

Ben Landis blew out a breath of sheer relief. He had laid down the law to his son Bob about going to Sam Johns' Whiskey Ranch. He'd told Bob that if ever he caught him meeting that 'breed gal he'd double a wet rope to his hide. Ben Landis had his sights raised about whom Bob should marry. The best was none too good for the son of Ben Landis. Mess around and run off and marry Sam Johns' 'breed daughter, and he'd cut him off at the pockets. . . . But now he was almighty glad that Bob had slipped off after dark to meet Rose Johns. . . .

Ben Landis grinned. He turned to Pete Wiley with a vast relief. "All right. We'll ride right now over to the Whiskey Ranch, and ask her to prove where Bob was at third guard time. You're kinda soft on that Rose gal. I reckon it'll hurt, but will you take Rose Johns' word for it that she was lolly-gaggin' around with Bob?"

"I'll take Rose Johns' word," Pete said stiffly. His eyes watched Bob Landis.

"The hell of it is," blurted Bob, "she never showed up. She was to meet me at midnight. I waited till about one. Then I figgered she'd made a plumb fool outa me. It was when I rode away from the hay camp and topped the ridge that I sighted the prairie fire. I whipped back to the ranch and let on like I just woke up and seen the blaze."

THE grin died away on Ben Landis' face. His eyes squinted. There was a gun in his hand and it was pointed at Pete Wiley's belly. The four gun-slingers slid their guns free. Only Bob Landis did not reach for a gun.

"I'm takin' Bob's word for the truth." Ben Landis spoke with something of his old bluster, "Take your hand away from that gun, Wiley, or use it. It'd be jake by me to kill you. There ain't another man 'ud take your ramrod job for any kind of money. And without you ramroddin' the outfit, it would be like takin' pennies out of a blind man's hat to pick up the Three Bars for any price I want to pay."

Pete Wiley's right hand came away from his six-shooter and rested on the horn of his saddle. He still held the whiskey bottle with the coal oil.

"My gun," Pete Wiley's eyes held the eyes of the sheepman, "is empty. I sighted the fire and emptied it at the sky to wake up the camp, and I plumb fergot to reload. And I got a notion to believe what

Bob said. You wouldn't risk sendin' your own son to set that fire. Not when you kin hire it done by these gun-toters."

"You actually believe," said Ben Landis, "you actually believe that I ordered that fire."

Pete Wiley held up the whiskey bottle with the kerosene. Its original label was washed away.

"Yeah. Sam Johns always washes off the labels on his bottles of moonshine likker. This looks like one of his. Until you fetch me absolute proof otherwise, I'll claim that your outfit set fire to the Three Bars range."

Ben Landis slowly slid his gun back, eyes squinted.

"And the man that set that fire, killed my brother Phil. Now take your whelp Bob and your two-bit gun-slingers and pull out. You're on my Three Bars range."

Ben Landis stared hard into Pete Wiley's eyes, then reined his horse. "Come along."

Pete Wiley sat his horse, watching them out of sight. Then he slid his six-shooter out and began ejecting the exploded shells. When the gun was loaded, he motioned his men to bring the wagon to the place where Phil's dead body lay. Phil was lifted and put in the wagon beside the water barrels, and they moved on to where the Three Bars roundup was camped, silent, grim-lipped, hard-eyed.

CHAPTER THREE

Guilty as Hell!

BURDETTE had worked for the Three Bars outfit. He'd gone to work for the outfit as bronc rider, riding the rough string, till one day Pete Wiley surprised him and another cowpuncher. The bronc Burdette had been riding threw him twice, and the cowhand had picked up his horse and fetched the bronc back. And when Pete Wiley had ridden up Burdette had the bronc front footed and had managed to fasten on a pair of rawhide hobbles. Then he'd doubled his ketch rope and began working over the brute. The bronc, terrified and dripping with sweat, its foreleg hobbled, had lunged and fallen time after time, snorting, trembling. And the cowhand stood by, too scared of Burdette to interfere with the brutality.

Pete Wiley had knocked the gun out of his hand, then given him the worst whipping a man could take. And when he lay there slobbering and whipped and begging for mercy, Pete Wiley had used the same ketch rope on him.

"Start walking. You're headed for town and it's a forty mile walk."

Pete had ridden alongside him for the first mile or so, double-roping him every time the man stopped. He had sent his saddle and bed to town, and the next thing he knew Burdette had gone to work for the Landis Lazy L outfit. When Ben Landis located his land jumpers, Burdette was given his choice of the homesteads. . . .

Back in Ben Landis' mind was the notion that Pete Wiley would some day have to be killed. And he knew he had located the right man for the job, because Burdette hated Pete Wiley. Burdette was the natural leader for the gun-slingers he'd hired, and if it came to a range war that called for dirty work, Ben Landis knew he had found the right man for the job.

Burdette buried the clothes on which he had spilled the coal oil. He'd shaved and bathed and put on clean clothes. With his black hair and big, well-built body, he was handsome in a hard, dangerous way.

Rose Johns was not the only girl who found him attractive. He was by far the best dancer at the cow country dances. When he set his mind to it his line of talk was far above the conversation of the bashful and awkward talk of the average tongue-tied cowboy.

Rose Johns kept him at his distance. It was more in the way of revenge than anything else that she took Burdette away from any good-looking girl that had her eye on him.

Burdette's hard green eyes looked at her. He had waited until she came out to the hammock swung between two cottonwood trees. He had walked, with a swaggering gait over to her. His grin was twisted and his eyes hard, as he stood there, thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt.

Rose lay on her back, a mail order catalog in her hand. Her slate-gray eyes looked at him, unsmiling under her black brows.

"Well?" Burdette grinned down at her.

She gave him no answer.

"Checking the bet back to me, eh? I could make a good poker player out of you."

"A crooked poker player. A tinhorn poker player."

"Have it your own way. Never give a sucker a break, someone said." He grinned. "One of these days, I'll take you for a horseback ride. Plumb to the top of the highest point in the Pine Hills. Look in any direction as far as you kin see, and you'll be looking out on the range that will belong to me. And that's no whiskey talk."

Rose Johns smiled mirthlessly. When he reached down and took one of her hands in his, she made no move to withdraw it.

"Listen, Rose. It won't be too long to wait—a year or so. When I git a-holt of the big Three Bars, and the Landis outfit to boot, how'd you like to be Mrs. Burdette? Silks and diamonds and the biggest house in town. Trips all over the country, anywheres you and me wanted to travel."

Her laugh mocked him. He flushed darkly.

"Well. What do you say?"

"Drop around," Rose said, "when you git the job done."

"If I owned all that big cow country, lock, stock and barrel, would you marry me?"

"Yes."

BURDETTE gripped her hand tighter. He leaned over her to kiss her. Rose Johns slapped him across the mouth, hard enough to draw blood as his lips were mashed back against his teeth.

"Lay it on the line," Rose Johns said, "Until then, it's so much whiskey talk." She pulled her hand away, looking past him and out to where the trail dropped off the ridge. Burdette turned his head and then swung to his feet, his green eyes narrowed.

"Ben Landis, Bob, and four of their tough hands." Then he looked down at Rose. "All right. You saw me when I rode back to camp before daybreak. How much of that are you tellin'?"

"I saw you ride away after you'd let Sam Johns poker you out of a hundred dollars to make him feel good, after you got my brother Jimmy dead drunk. I saw you ride away. And watched you when you came back. Also, the can of coal oil ain't on the outside shelf of the woodshed. What is it you want me to tell for a lie?"

"That I was here. That I hadn't left the ranch last night."

She frowned thoughtfully. "I had my saddled horse in the barn," she said.

"I know. I turned him out."

"I was supposed to meet Bob Landis. . . . Bob wanted me to run off and marry him."

"Would you?"

"I don't know. Mama had one of her bad spells last night and I had to stay with her."

"That ain't no kind of an answer."

"It's the best I can give you, off hand. . . . They're comin' now."

"Will you tell them, Rose, that I never

set food off the ranch last night?"

She nodded. "I'll string along with you, Burdette. I'll lie for you. But don't get any mistaken ideas. I'm curious, that's all. And it gives me a tailholt on you."

Ben Landis and Bob and their four gun-slingers had come straight from the prairie fire, without bothering to so much as wash their faces. They rode up to where Burdette was and pulled up.

For a long moment Ben Landis eyed Burdette in silence. Then he broke it.

"Where were you last night?"

"Why?"

"Never mind why, Burdette. Where were you?"

"Here. Right here. Drinkin' likker and playing three handed poker with Sam Johns and Jimmy." He cut Rose Johns a look and one of his mirthless grins.

"And I turned Rose's horse loose so she couldn't ride out to meet Bob. And when Sam and Jimmy both got too drunk to tell the ace from a dirty deuce, I kept Rose company . . ."

Ben Landis fixed his squinted bloodshot pale eyes on the sweaty smudged mask on Rose.

"That's right." Her smile was fixed on Bob Landis.

Ben Landis grunted. "I told Bob to stay away from 'breed gals," he said, adding, "Then Bob wasn't lyin' when he said he'd rode to meet you. Where?"

"At the old hay camp. At midnight."

Rose swung her feet over the hammock and stood there, smoothing her dress.

"Anything else you want to know, Ben Landis? Ask it quick. Then get off the ranch and outa my sight."

"Somebody set a prairie fire on the Three Bars range. . . ." Ben Landis was looking at Burdette. "When Phil Wiley rode up and ketched him at it, he shot and killed him."

A quick gasp escaped Rose before she could check it. The color drained from her face.

"Wild Phil . . . killed?"

"Yeah. If you're lyin' to me, Burdette. And this 'breed gal is lyin' to cover you, then I'll trip you up, and she'll be ketched in the same trip rope."

Burdette was poker-faced. His green eyes narrowed. He stood there, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"Too bad it wasn't Pete Wiley," Burdette said flatly. His eyes cut a look at Bob Landis. "Mebbyso, Bob, you didn't ride to the hay camp."

"That's what Pete Wiley figgered," Bob Landis said. "But I rode to the hay camp and waited till one or one-thirty. Then I sighted the fire. But Pete Wiley has changed his mind. That checks the bet to Pete, and he aims to hunt down the man who killed his brother."

SAM JOHNS and his son Jimmy came riding back from the whiskey still. They reined up, staring at the black faces and singed clothes, slack-jawed.

"What the hell's the rip?" asked Sam Johns.

"Somebody tried to burn out the Three Bars range. And Wild Phil Wiley rode up on him and got murdered. Where was Burdette last night? I don't want any lies outa you, Sam. Or your 'breed whelp, Jimmy. Where was Burdette last night round third guard time?"

"Here. Right here. Drinkin' likker. I pokered him out of a hundred bucks. Hell, he was too drunk to saddle a horse. Woke me up somewheres betwixt midnight and daybreak hollerin' fer another jug. Burdette was right here all last night. I kin swear to that without a word of a lie. . . ."

"Yeah. The old man's right," put in Jimmy. "Ask Rose."

"Wild Phil," said Sam Johns, "owed me fer the last two jugs of likker. Mebbyso I kin get the money outa Pete. From now on I trust nobody. Cash on the barrelhead, or no booze. Want a drink, Ben?"

Ben Landis snorted. "Not of that rotgut. Git your horse, Burdette." Then Ben Landis glared at Sam Johns. "If ever Bob shows up here for booze, or to come lollygaggin' around your daughter, you rotgut peddler, I'll send you to the pen! Hear that?"

Sam Johns nodded.

"Run Bob off. He's on the Injun list. Don't fergit it!"

Ben Landis and his four grinning tough hands rode away. When Bob would have lingered, the sheepman swung his rawhide quirt across his back.

"You've done enough damage. Git fer home!"

The four gun-slingers and Bob were riding out of sight, while Ben Landis waited for Burdette to saddle. The sheepman eyed Sam Johns and his son Jimmy and his daughter Rose. Burdette rode up from the barn, shoving a saddle carbine into its scabbard.

The wife of Sam Johns appeared in the cabin doorway. Once this half-breed daughter of a famous Government scout had been beautiful. Now hardship and bitterness and a hatred for her husband, had marred that beauty. White-haired thin, an invalid, only the beauty of her dark eyes remained and these were deep sunken. Weak and ill and mentally deranged, she pointed an accusing finger at Burdette who had just ridden up to the cabin.

"He lied when he said that he spent the night here! Sam Johns and my son Jimmy were dead drunk. He promised my daughter the Three Bars and the Landis outfits if she'd marry him. He would take her up to the highest butte in the Pine Hills and show her all the land that he would own. Lies! That man is no good for my Rose. He made her lie for him. He rode away from here early last night. He rode back just before daybreak. Bur-

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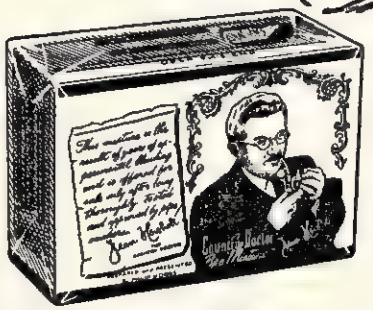

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dette set that fire! Burdette. . . . Go now, Rose. Run away. Run, before it's too late! Your sick mother is all that keeps you here. I will keep you no longer!"

The half-breed wife of Sam Johns had a butcher knife in her hands. She lifted it and would have plunged it into her heart, but her strength was spent and she coughed, blood spilling from her open mouth. Rose ran to her mother and eased her to the ground and she coughed out her life in Rose's arms. . . .

Ben Landis had a gun in his hand now, covering Burdette. He spoke with a flat-toned voice. "Take it easy, Burdette. You started this. You're guilty as hell, and all the 'breed girl's lying can't alibi you. That woman of Sam Johns told the truth. Burdette, you started this. By hell, you're going to finish it accordin' to my orders!"

Without taking his eyes from Burdette, Ben Landis spoke to Sam Johns and Jimmy. "You're comin' along. Pete Wiley wants war, and we're a-givin' it to him and the Three Bars outfit. Saddle your horses!"

Sam Johns and his son Jimmy were eager and anxious enough to get away from the Whiskey Ranch.

"Rattle your hocks, Jimmy." Sam Johns avoided looking at his dead wife. Jimmy walked wide around his dead mother.

Rose had taken a torn strip from her petticoat and wiped the blood from the dead woman's face and closed her eyes. Dry-eyed she sat there and looked at the men.

"Don't kill me!" Burdette had his hands lifted to the level of his wide shoulders. "Don't murder me!"

"Shut up. I told you I wasn't finished with usin' you yet."

Rose sat there and watched Ben Landis, Burdette, and her father and brother. Ben Landis herded them ahead of him out of sight.

Only then did Rose move. She carried her mother into the cabin. She combed and brushed the dead woman's hair, dressed her in her best dress, then dug a grave between the cottonwoods. She wrapped her in a Hudson's Bay blanket and buried her.

Rose Johns saddled her horse and rode away, dry eyed and without a backward glance. She was headed for the Three Bars roundup camp.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell Waits for Sheepmen

PETE WILEY, ramrod of the Three Bars, was getting ready to move camp. He had buried Wild Phil Wiley there. It was just at sundown.

Rose Johns, wearing clean faded Levis overalls and boots and hat, rode up out of the sunset. She reined up alongside of Pete Wiley.

"I've quit the Whiskey Ranch," Rose said tonelessly. "My mother is dead. There is nothing to hold me there. I'm quitting the country. Pulling out. But before I left I had to talk to you. Burdette set that prairie fire. Burdette killed Phil. Ben Landis didn't hire him to set that fire. Burdette did it on his own hook. He was gambling on the Three Bars outfit and the Landis outfit locking horns, on your putting the blame on Ben Landis. And when the shooting was over, and Burdette was ramrodding his tough hand, he was gambling on Ben Landis and his son being killed. Gambling on you being killed. Then he'd move in and claim both."

"Burdette—"

"Wait a minute. You ain't heard it all. Ben Landis' hand is forced. He has to play his string out. Ben Landis means war. He's gathered Burdette and Sam Johns and my no good brother. He's gathering all the tough renegades he's got. He's taking the range war to you."

"I figgered on a range war. It was bound to come. I'm ready." He looked at Rose.

"Where are you going?"

"Yonderly. Drifting."

"Listen! Now ain't the time to say this, with the Three Bars cowhands gettin' the horses and wagons ready to move camp, but I know you got no place to go. I'm kinda tongue-tied and awkward and feelin' like a darned fool, but if I come outa this range war with a whole hide . . . well, you kin do a lot better, but will you marry me?" Pete Wiley was sweating.

"You marry the 'breed brat of Sam Johns? It sounds like pity!"

"I've been in love with you for a long time, Rose. But with that Burdette around. . . . I love you, Rose. Will you marry me?" Sweat glistened on his flushed face.

"I wanted to get away from the Whiskey Ranch. I had half a notion to hook Bob Landis and his money, but I despise the sight of him. I wanted to get away from Whiskey Ranch, but I know now that I could never have married a man I didn't love."

Rose Johns' slate-gray eyes looked straight into Pete Wiley's. She spoke without smiling. But her eyes lost their bitter hardness and became soft, misted.

"You are the only man I've ever loved, Pete. I'd be proud to marry you. No man has ever kissed me. I'm asking you to kiss me."

It was an awkward kiss, there in front of the whole Three Bars outfit.

"Turn yore heads!" bawled the roundup cook. "Ain't you got no manners?"

"Rose Johns is playing fer keeps, kissing Pete. Looks like he done popped the question."

They held onto each other's hands. Pete Wiley was grinning. It was Rose who called out in a sort of shaky voice, "I'm goin' to marry Pete Wiley. For keeps."

"Head for the home ranch," yelled Pete. "Get them Winchesters out of the bed-wagon. Take plenty of cartridges. Peaceful orders from them white collared owners, or not, there's a war on, and Ben Landis started it. Any man who don't want a fight, is plumb welcome to pull out."

"It's about time we drawed Winchesters. We'll back your play!"

"Save Burdette fer me. He's the man murdered Phil!"

They rode to the bed wagon, and grabbed their saddle carbines. Pete told them to ride scattered out and head for the home ranch.

PETE and Rose rode a little way behind. She clung to his hand, and for the first time since early girlhood, the tears came, thawing and melting the bitterness in her heart.

After a time she stopped crying, and Pete untied his clean black silk neck handkerchief and handed it to her.

"First time . . . I ever bawled. I'm through now."

Later on she told Pete that she wanted one of the saddle guns. If there wasn't a scabbard, she'd pack it across her saddle. She could shoot.

"And don't try to stop me. Any man I think is worth marrying, is worth fighting for. I won't get underfoot. If you die, I want to die with you."

Pete Wiley savvied. He knew better than to argue with this girl.

Along the way to the Three Bars home ranch, Pete and Rose Johns talked. Rose told of her early girlhood. How she had tried to save her mother from the drunken abuse and had been shoved aside and beaten, while her drunken renegade father, too cowardly to face a man, took his orneriness out on her mother. And her brother Jimmy, raised on a whiskey bottle, had stood back with his grinning cowardliness. Sam Johns had his plans made for Rose. Marry her off to some wealthy

rancher, then move in on her. . . .

"Since I can remember there has been nothing but contempt and hatred in my heart for my father and brother. Do you think I have any of Sam John's bad blood in me?"

"No!" Pete Wiley was fierce in his denial. "You are what you are. What your mother was. Any girl who can come out of that Whiskey Ranch as clean and fine, and brave as you are . . . it puts a man to shame. I wish I was handy with words!"

"Phil liked you. He was at the Whiskey Ranch more often than me. Phil liked you a lot without being in love—"

"I know. He fought Bob Landis on my account."

"I'll tell you somethin' that nobody knows. The Three Bars was ready to quit. Sell out to Ben Landis at his own price. Phil and I had some money left us by my father. We pooled it to take an option. About a third down. If we're lucky, I'll get the bank to back me. I'll own the Three Bars. Since Ben and Bob Landis are declarin' war, they got to be killed."

The Three Bars, with its log buildings and pole corrals spread out along Beef Creek, looked like a small settlement. It was a spread worth fighting for.

The roundup outfit pulled in about midnight. There were scattered Landis renegades riding the skyline, watching them, and when the roundup outfit moved in at the home ranch those riders took the report to Landis.

The remuda was corraled and they all caught night horses, then turned the cavvy loose in the horse pasture. Pete posted half a dozen armed guards.

The cook back in his ranch kitchen did himself proud with the meal and baked a pie for Rose.

Pete Wiley opened up the big log house built to order for the city dude owners. They came out during the hunting season or on their vacations, bringing booze and fancy canned stuff. It was furnished like a hunting lodge, and there was a big stone fireplace, a bunk room, and a women's bunk room, in case they were coaxed into fetching their wives. Pete ushered Rose into the women's bunk room with a grin. There was even a shower, and toilet articles, and some left-behind clothes. He told her to help herself to anything she wanted.

Pete Wiley, after supper, told the men to grab what sleep they could get. But they were too much on edge. They sat around the bunk house talking.

JUST before daybreak the guards rode in. "They're coming from all sides. Burdette . . . Sam and Jimmy Johns . . . Ben Landis and his son Bob—to make sure and certain that there won't be no slip-up in their plans, they're a-fetchin' it to us!"

"Don't show a light," Pete Wiley told them. "Not so much as a match to light a cigarette. You all got your orders. Every man is staked out where it will do the most good. Stay in pairs. We'll give 'em a belly full of what they're after."

In the gray light of dawn, Ben Landis had the Three Bars ranch surrounded. No one was in sight, but Pete and his men knew that they were there. The waiting was the hardest part.

Then out of the dawn rode Ben Landis, a white silk handkerchief tied to the end of his saddle gun.

"Wiley!" Ben Landis bellowed. "Step out. I want to pow-wow with you!"

Pete Wiley opened the door and stepped out on the porch, a Winchester saddle gun in his hands.

"I just found out about that option you hold on the Three Bars outfit. I'll pay you double and give you a job ramrodding the outfit."

"It ain't for sale. Not at any price. Throw in your Landis outfit with the Three Bars; make a big jackpot. And

They came in, horses spurred to a run.

we'll fight for it. Winner take all, and no holts barred. Git back with your dirty white rag. You came here to fight. Then fight."

"The Landis Lazy L against your Three Bars. It's a deal!"

Ben Landis rode back to where his men were. When he was out of sight, his voice bellowed, "All set! Let 'em have it!"

Ben Landis fired the first shot. Pete Wiley had gone back inside and shut and barred the door. Ben Landis' .30-30 bullet tore a small round hole through the curtained window.

They came from all sides, horses spurred to a run. A few carried lighted torches soaked in coal oil. Covered by the guns, they meant to throw the lighted torches on the roof or the porch of the lodge.

"Git them fire setters!" shouted Pete Wiley.

Their gunfire centered on the men carrying lighted torches, and every one of them was shot down. The charge swept by like a whirlwind, and out of sight and in behind shelter. The riderless horses stampeded off. . . .

Ben Landis was cursing. Sam Johns and son Jimmy, each packing a torch, had been shot loose from their saddles and they lay on the ground within arm's reach of each other. Their objective was the main house and they had nearly reached it. One of those blazing rags was on the porch now.

JIMMY was dead. His torch gripped in a death hold in his hand. Sam Johns was badly wounded. He had flung his blazing torch on the porch.

Gut-shot, he gripped his belly with both hands. He stared, wide eyed, at his son Jimmy. Then he began shouting and sobbing and begging them not to shoot him again.

"Don't kill me!" He began crawling

towards the steps of the porch. "I give up! I had to do what I done, Pete, Rose is there. I'll give Rose to you, Pete Wiley. Only don't shoot me no more!"

Sam Johns staggered to his feet and towards the steps of the porch.

Rose slid back the bar and jerked the door open and stepped out with a saddle gun in her hand.

"Pick up that torch and throw it out in the dirt!"

With a last effort that took all his strength, Sam Johns grabbed the stick that held the burning rag and flung it on the ground.

A silence fell, and there was no sound of shooting. They all eyed the girl with her gun pointed at her gut-shot father.

"I done like you said, Rose. Help your father inside. . . ."

Rose Johns' laugh was brittle, bitter. She lifted her gun to point it at her wounded father.

"Don't!" screamed Sam Johns. "Don't kill your own father!"

Dropping his saddle gun, Pete Wiley leaped out the door. He grabbed Rose from behind and jerked the gun from her hands.

Ben Landis rode out from behind the shelter, his saddle gun aimed at Pete Wiley. Pete saw him and flung the girl roughly back through the doorway behind him.

With the same unbroken movement, without a lost motion, he swung Rose's gun to his shoulder and fired. A split-second later a bullet fanned his head. He jumped back inside the door and slammed it.

Pete Wiley's .30-30 bullet had dead centered Ben Landis between his eyes to spoil his aim. Pete moved to the window. He saw Ben Landis doubled over and his head lobbed forward, still sitting his gun-broke horse that had never untracked. Slowly, like in slow pantomime the big hulk of Ben Landis lurched forward, and the momentum of his two hundred pounds of limp weight carried him over. He struck the ground alongside his horse's forelegs, and lay there in a misshapen heap. . . .

Rose pulled Pete back from the window just before the bullets ripped through it, splattering shattered glass. She clung to him, sobbing.

Sam Johns lay there on the top step of the porch, clawing his belly with bloody hands while death glazed his eyes, and screaming curses at his daughter. The curses choked off in a death rattle. Sam Johns pitched forward and rolled down the steps of the porch and over onto the ground. He lay there dead beside his son.

There was a lull in the shooting now. Bob Landis' voice cried out, scared and bewildered at the death of his father. Not because of any fatherly love, but because Bob, since he could remember, had been under Ben Landis' rule.

"Ben's dead. Ben Landis is dead. I got a bellyfull. . . . Call your men off, Burdette! Send 'em back to the sheep camps! Burdette! Hear me? I'm givin' orders. You're hired by the Landis outfit. Send your gun-slingers back to their sheep camps!"

Burdette laughed.

Bob Landis rode out from behind the brush, his hand held high, a white silk neck handkerchief gripped in it.

"Don't shoot, Pete; I give up! Ben Landis is dead. I'll settle on your terms for the Landis outfit."

"Come ahead, Bob!" called Pete Wiley. "You're safe. Come on to the house, and we'll settle this peaceful!"

Bob Landis almost sobbed his thanks. He rode up to the house and dismounted, almost stumbling in his haste to mount the steps.

BURDETTE waited. Waited until he had reached the top step. Then from ambush he lined his sights and pulled the

trigger. Bob lurched a step forward, then with a choking death rattle that spewed blood, he toppled face down on the porch.

Burdette laughed flatly through the echoes of his gun.

"Drop back and take 'er easy, you curly wolves. It calls fer likker. Ben Landis and his whelp Bob gone to hell. And only Pete Wiley left. Fetch a jug of Sam Johns' rotgut."

Burdette lifted his voice to a shout that had all the bulldozing swagger he could put into it.

"Walk out on that Pete Wiley thing Rose. While the walkin' is good. I promised you all the cow country in sight from the highest butte in Pine Hills. Quit Pete Wiley now. Or if you don't come here now, and I've got to take you away from Pete Wiley's dead carcass, then, by the hellamighty, I'll horsewhip you till you crawl and beg fer mercy."

Rose lined her sights and fired at the sound of Burdette's voice. She emptied her saddle gun at him. So close that he had to ride back to a safer shelter.

Burdette and his renegades expected every Three Bars cowhand to be inside the buildings at the ranch. Whiskey jugs were passed and each man drank the rotgut moonshine booze like water.

"We'll drop back and hold 'em corraled till dark. Then we'll set a fire and smoke 'em out, shoot 'em down when they come out. Only keep watch and don't shoot my gal Rose by mistake. Drink up. But don't no man git too drunk to handle himself. And when the shootin's over, you'll git the treat of your lives a-watchin' Burdette whip-break that gal."

About three-fourths of the Three Bars cowhands had mounted and ridden away before daybreak, with orders from Pete Wiley to surround the renegades. And now they charged without warning, their horses spurred to a run, their guns blazing. Burdette and his renegades never had a chance. It lasted less than half an hour, then it was all over and there was not a man of the renegade outfit left alive.

Only Burdette. He had been saved. He had been overpowered, his guns emptied. They led him in on horseback with a ketch rope around his neck. Up to where Pete Wiley stood waiting on the porch of the lodge.

"You murdered my brother," Pete Wiley said slowly. "I'll give you your choice: Hangin', or I'll give you back your gun and we'll shoot it out."

"Give me my gun," said Burdette.

"Get back in the house, Rose. Load his gun, boys, and hand it to him. Take that rope off."

They took the rope off.

They hesitated about handing him the gun they had loaded for him.

"Let's string him up, Pete," one man said.

"I give him his choice. He took it."

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"He deserves hangin'," said Rose. "Don't give him a chance to kill you. He's rank poison with a gun. If you love me, hang that killer!"

"Git back in the house."

ROSE slid a hand inside her blouse. It came out with a snub-nosed belly gun. Pete caught her arm just as she shot at Burdette. Pete grabbed the gun. He was white-lipped. His grin was forced. And then he took Rose in his arms and kissed her, and her arms went up and around his neck and held.

"Hang him!" she called out, her voice brittle. "Take Burdette and hang him." She would not let go. She bit and clawed and fought.

"Come up here, a couple of you men. Hold Rose." He shook her hard. "Phil wouldn't want it like that. He'd want me to kill him, personal."

The Three Bars man who held Burdette's loaded gun was staring at Pete Wiley and Rose. Burdette reached down and grabbed his gun.

"Look out."

Pete Wiley flung Rose aside so hard she went sprawling. He had the belly gun he had taken away from Rose. Burdette's shot grazed his ribs.

Pete crouched and began shooting at Burdette. His first shot hit him high in the belly and doubled him up and Burdette's second wild shot whined past.

Pete Wiley was shooting now as fast as he could thumb back the gun hammer and pull the trigger. Every shot hit. He saw Burdette weave drunkenly and saw the six-shooter drop and he watched Burdette grab his chest with both hands.

Then Pete took more deliberate aim and sent the last bullet through the brain of Burdette.

Burdette slid over and onto the ground.

Rose stood in the doorway, a saddle gun in her hand. She laid down the gun and walked over to where Pete Wiley stood. She took the gun from his hand and threw it away. And then all her tensed nerves collapsed and Pete Wiley had to catch her to keep her from falling.

Pete Wiley lifted her in his arms. "Take care of everything that needs taking care of. Git rid of their dead carcasses."

"You bet. You take care of her and we'll mop up."

"Fainted," Rose murmured, her eyes opening. "Just like a woman." She smiled uncertainly.

"About time you let a man do a man's chores. And commenced bein' a woman."

* * *

Pete Wiley and Rose were married there at the Three Bars ranch, quietly, with the Three Bars cowhands dressed up in their Sunday best.

Ben Landis had made his deal. The Landis outfit went to Pete Wiley. The sheep were moved out and sold and the money used to take up the Three Bars option, with enough left over for a wedding trip. And when it was spent, they came home to the Three Bars ranch.

"I've got all the traveling and everything I want," Rose told Pete. "I'm ready to settle down now. I don't ever want to leave here. Pete . . . Pete, I'm so happy I could bawl!"

"Me, I feel like bawling myself."

The dinner bell sounded. The roundup cook had done himself proud. The cowpunchers were lined up and waiting. Somewhere, somehow, they had bought a brand new mail order crib.

"It's kinda early, we know. But it'll come in handy some day."

And Pete Wiley and his bride sat down at the head of the ranch banquet table.

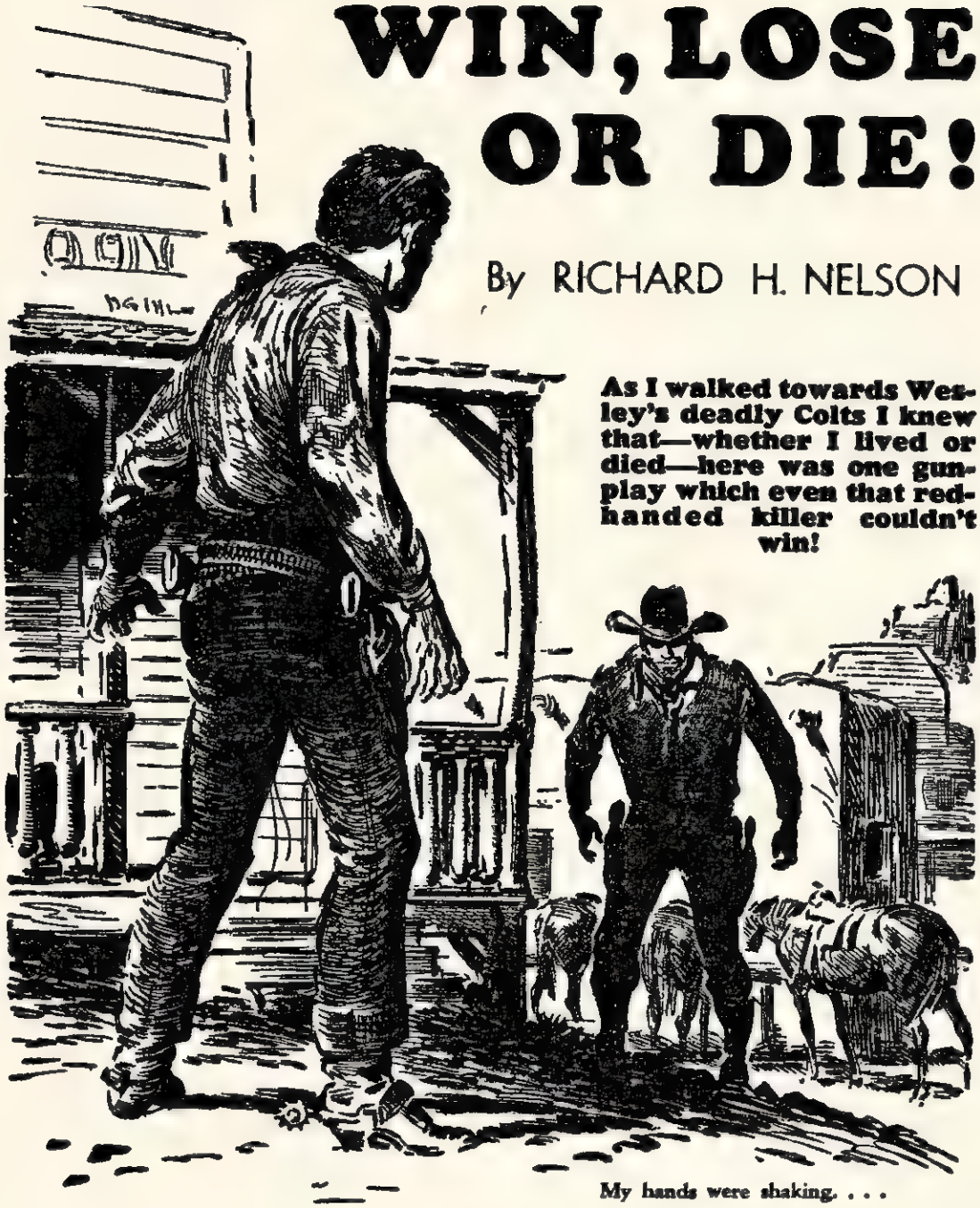
"I'll do my best not to disappoint you boys," Rose said. "And I'll gamble that Little Wild Phil Wiley will learn to ride before he can walk. . . ."

THE END

WIN, LOSE OR DIE!

By RICHARD H. NELSON

As I walked towards Wesley's deadly Colts I knew that—whether I lived or died—here was one gunplay which even that red-handed killer couldn't win!



My hands were shaking. . . .

I GUESS I didn't honestly expect my father to beat Henry Wesley in a shoot-out, but I was doing some powerful praying, that sultry day in early September.

Before he went looking for Henry Wesley, Pa took my brother Ed and me into Ches Marker's General Store, after hitching our team with the buckboard in the street. The little brass bell over the door clinked sourly as we came in. Ches was there, standing behind his warped pine-board counter, leaning with his broad palms pressed on the counter top. He eyed my father curiously, and somehow, he looked more like a range-rider in his

red-checked shirt than a store-keeper.

"You're wearing your sixguns pretty low, John Farnham," he said to Pa, "if you're just in town for groceries," Ches always called men by their full names. It was one of the few things I didn't like about him, because my given name is Herbert, and at the age of seventeen, I was touchy about it.

My father fingered the butts of his .45's thoughtfully before he answered Ches.

"I wouldn't say I was in town for groceries exactly," he said at length. "I want you to keep my boys here till I come back, Chester, if it won't put you out too much."

"Pa," my brother said, "if you're going after Mr. Wesley, I'm going too."

My father looked almost angry then. "Like blazes you'll go with me," he said. "I wouldn't have brought the two of you at all, if you hadn't threatened to saddle up and follow me into town. You're both going to stay right here with Ches Marker until I come back to get you, or there'll be two sore-fannied young cow-pokes in Dry Creek Valley tomorrow, as well as a dead rustler."

Ches pricked up his ears at that. "You don't plan to gun for Henry Wesley, do you, John?"

"Not only do I plan to, I'm on my way," Pa told him.

"But Wesley is fast," Ches protested, wheezing a little. "He's a rustler, sure, but we can't touch him. We've got to wait, John—his time'll come."

My father slapped his gun butts and turned to the door. "If there's any justice in heaven, his time *has* come."

It scared me. Henry Wesley was terribly fast with a .45; faster than my father, and the thought of it scared me. "Pa, wait," I said, conscious that my voice wasn't steady, "you can't expect God to help you in a shoot-out."

He turned to us, framed in the open door, against the glare and shimmering heat waves from the street. It seemed as though he was suddenly taller.

"Maybe God won't, but don't ever say He can't be expected to help the righteous. He can, and if He wants it, Henry Wesley will be just another dead rustler today." He looked right at me when he said that. "Let's hope it's the way He wants things," he finished, and walked out into the sunlight. It came to me that I'd never heard him talk so much about God before, and that scared me even more. Ed and I crouched in the doorway, with Ches Marker standing over us, and the three of us watched Pa walk slowly up the exact center of the street with the white sunlight pressing down around him. The street was empty, and I realized later that someone must have seen us drive into town, and had warned Henry Wesley that Pa was wearing guns. Wesley's conscience would have told him who Pa would be looking for.

PA WAS halfway up the street, between the Dry Creek Palace Bar and Ches's store, when a stocky man in a coal black shirt stepped off the porch of the Palace and started towards Pa. It was Henry Wesley, his low-slung, holstered sixguns swinging with the easy motion of his broad hips, as he and Pa moved slowly toward one another. I felt Ed's hand tightening on my shoulder, and Ches was wheezing audibly as we watched.

Pa was opposite the Dutchman's Stables when Wesley's hands flashed to his guns. Pa was drawing too late; Wesley had already drawn. The shot sounded flat and far away. Pa stiffened, and fell almost slowly, like a hewn pine. His guns were out, but their muzzles were pointed to earth. His dead fingers jerked their triggers, and the slugs sent up twin miniature geysers of red dust.

Ed and I ran out of the store together, to where Pa lay, face down in the thick

dust of the street. His strong hands were relaxing on the butts of his guns. I heard Ed repeating, "Christ, oh, Christ," over and over at a great distance, and suddenly the street was full of people. All the faces were blurred, and I couldn't make out what they were saying to Ed and me. I didn't want to hear them, I suppose.

We were well out of town when things cleared up a little. I saw that someone was riding beside our buckboard, and then I recognized Tom Whittaker, Dry Creek's sheriff. Pa's gun belt was slung over Tom's saddle-horn. Ed was driving the team, his eyes straight ahead, and I knew he was seeing Pa die again. I didn't look behind me at what lay on the bed of the buckboard.

Tom Whittaker was riding on my brother's side of the road.

"Feeling better now, Ed?" he asked. Ed nodded. "I was just wondering why your dad came looking for Hank Wesley the way he did."

"Fifty head of our best Hereford stock were run off the place last night," Ed told him. "Pa was pretty sure Mr. Wesley did it."

"Pretty sure? How could be be sure he wasn't going after the wrong man?"

"Mr. Wesley was in town today, wasn't he?"

A sort of tradition had sprung up in Dry Creek Valley. Whenever a rancher found himself missing stock, he could be pretty sure of finding Wesley in town at the Palace Bar the day after the rustling. It was Wesley's way of giving his victims one chance to prosecute, or forget. My father hadn't been the first to try his hand at prosecuting. And afterwards, Wesley was still safe from the law, because shoot-outs weren't yet illegal in all parts of the wide-open Western Territories. Wesley's mere presence in Dry Creek after a rustling was the same as admission of guilt. Tom Whittaker acknowledged that with a grunt, and we rode in silence the rest of the way up Deadhorse Canyon, towards our small spread.

WE WERE in sight of the yellowing aspen grove that marked our homestead, when I thought of my mother for the first time since the shoot-out. I remembered her helpless expression when Pa had stormed out of the house, buckling on his gunbelt, with Ed and me after him, and I wondered hopelessly how to explain what had happened. A thing like this might kill her, I thought, and that's when I really began hating Henry Wesley.

She was standing in the narrow doorway when Ed reined up in front of the house. At first I couldn't bring myself to meet her eyes, but when I did I saw there was no need to explain.

Tom Whittaker swung out of his saddle and clumsily pulled off his sombrero.

"I hate t' be the one t' tell y', ma'am," he began slowly.

"There's no need, Mr. Whittaker," Ma said. "I guess I knew this morning what would happen when he left like that . . . it was good of you to come back with the boys," she finished.

She didn't say another word, until Pa lay on the bed in the back room, wrapped in the length of good white cloth Ches Marker had covered him with in town. Then she stood beside the bed for a time, and I thought she must be praying. I couldn't understand that. The harm had been done, and there was nothing that God could do for us, now. After that, she came out with us to see Tom Whittaker mount his sorrel gelding to start back to Dry Creek.

"I wish I could do something about this, Mrs. Farnham, but near as I can figure, from what they told me in town, Hank Wesley beat John fair and square."

"But it wasn't fair," I heard myself shouting. "Pa wasn't a gunman . . . he . . ."

"Never mind, Herb," he said in a flat, dead voice. "Mr. Wesley hasn't seen the last of the Farnhams—not yet he hasn't."

Tom Whittaker raised his eyebrows a little. "Now, simmer down, Ed. Wesley's the fastest man with guns in Dry Creek Valley. And, even if you could beat him, there's a citizens' committee in Dry Creek that's gettin' mighty riled up over all these here shoot-outs. They're just about liable t' up an hang' the next man who kills somebody in a gun fight, whether he's an honest man or not. They're gettin' right touchy about all this killin'."

"I don't see anybody hangin' Mr. Wesley," I said.

"Just about one more killin', an' you're likely t' see 'most anything," the old sheriff said ominously. "There's talk of vigilantes, an' vigilantes ain't always choosey about what kind o' man they're hangin', if there's any blood on his hands."

He waited for a moment, but no one said anything more, so he nodded abruptly to Ma, and spurred down the road toward town.

WE BURIED Pa on the edge of the aspen grove, and things went on much as they always had before. My brother Ed took Pa's chores on the place, but there was always that empty chair at the supper table, and the ranch work was carried on with a strange quiet over all. Though I didn't realize it then, all of us were waiting for what had to come sooner or later.

It came very soon. Ed was gone early one Saturday morning, not more than three weeks after Pa's shoot-out with Mr. Wesley. Pa's guns and cartridge belt were gone from their place by the door. I didn't say anything to Ma, but sprinted out to the corral, and threw a saddle on my pinto mare. Pa's blue roan was gone too. Ed had left his chestnut stallion and taken Pa's roan instead. If I had any doubts at all, I knew then for sure why Ed had gone into town wearing Pa's .45's. I ran back to the house and snatched the old Sharps lever action carbine from its place over the fireplace. I grabbed four of the huge cartridges from their pasteboard box on the mantelpiece, and turned to the door again. Then I saw Ma. She was sitting in her bentwood rocker, in the darkest corner of the room. She held the big family Bible in her hands, not reading, but just sitting there, rocking almost imperceptibly. I didn't think she saw me, and I started for the door, the rifle in one hand and the cartridges in the other.

"Herb," she said, so quietly that I wasn't sure she had spoken at all. I paused and looked at her questioningly.

"You'd better leave the rifle here, son. That way, they won't be able to hurt you, too."

"Ma, I—"

"Leave it here, with me, Herb."

She put out her hand, and looked at me. I saw that she had been crying. I had never remembered her crying before, not even the day Pa was killed. The old gun's battered stock touched her outstretched hand, and I felt the cool steel of its barrel stroke my palm as she drew it away from me.

"Hurry now," she said. I dropped the four cartridges in her lap and ran from the house.

The part of the road from our place to Dry Creek, which descends to the valley floor through Deadhorse Canyon, has always been a painfully slow part of the trip. This time I gave the mare her head, and urged her along with my heels. In my mind there was a confusion of scenes. Pa died again in the street outside the Dutchman's Stables, Ed was gazing blankly at Tom Whittaker and telling me that Mr. Wesley hadn't seen the last of the Farnhams, and my mother was rocking in a dark corner of the front room, the family Bible in her left hand, and our old Sharps

carbine in her right. Then the pinto was thundering across the stretch of straight road toward the squalid board buildings of Dry Creek.

I reined in at Ches Marker's General Store, where I saw Pa's blue roan hitched by the watering trough. The street was full of people further along, up by the Dry Creek Palace Bar, so I pulled the pinto's head around and rode on into the crowd. Men looked up at me, and I heard some call me by name. Ed was lying in the middle of the sea of faces, doubled in a knot of agony. He wasn't dead, but he hadn't beaten Henry Wesley either, and I knew then that I would some day strap on my father's guns, and ride into town, looking for my enemy.

They helped me carry Ed to Ches Marker's store, and Ches made him as comfortable as possible on the long, narrow counter. Then one of the men went to get Doc Petersen, while Ches told me how it happened.

"It was the same way your Pa got it," he exclaimed, "but it was a near thing. If Edward had been just a mite faster—well, Wesley was pretty crowded for time. It was a near thing, for a fact.

"Before it happened, I didn't tumble to why Edward was in town, till he started out of here. He said somethin' about hopin' Mr. Wesley was in the habit o' riding into town on Saturday mornings for mail, like most other folks in the valley. Then he stopped old Les Hewitt who was walkin' by, and asked him if he'd be so kind as to stop by the Palace on his way up the street, to see if Henry Wesley might be there. Lester saw Edward's guns, and high-tailed, I'll tell y', and it wasn't more'n a minute till Wesley was steppin' into the street and walkin' this way, just like before."

I DIDN'T listen to the rest of it. At the counter, I heard Doc Petersen say something about taking Ed's right arm off at the shoulder. A strange coldness came over me then. I realized that my life could be only one thing now. I would have to prepare myself to meet Wesley. My father hadn't been fast enough with guns, and Ed hadn't either, but Wesley wasn't unbeatable—I was sure of that. It would take practise—a lot of practise, but there was nothing else for me, now.

Doc Petersen didn't take Ed's arm off after all, but he said it wouldn't ever be much good again, because Henry Wesley's bullet had smashed the bone. So we brought Ed home, and he was pretty sick for a long while, and lay in bed with his face to the wall most of the time while his wound was healing. He didn't say much, and I guess I didn't go out of my way to talk to him, since I was spending all my free time getting ready for a shoot-out with Mr. Wesley.

I had saved about eight dollars toward a new saddle before Pa had been killed, and now I used it all to buy cartridges for Pa's .45's. Every morning, after milking and splitting wood, I took the guns from their hiding place back of the oat bin in the barn, where Ma could never find them, filled both pockets with shells, and walked about three miles over the open range land to an isolated aspen grove at the foot of the barren Parker hills. A few of the aspen leaves were still yellow, but most of them had turned dead brown, and each time I put a slug into the heart of a tree, it would send down a shower of dry leaves.

But I didn't just practise to improve my aim. It was the draw that worried me. I remembered the pale blur of Wesley's hands, flashing to and from his holsters. I had to be faster than that.

I filed the front sights off both guns so that there was no chance of their catching in the stitchings of the holsters. The rest was a matter of co-ordination. After two weeks, my hands moved as fast as Wesley's, but that wasn't good enough. I

had to be faster. I was practising four hours a day, finding new muscles in my back and shoulders and wrists that I had never known existed before. Blisters came and went in the palms of both hands from constantly rubbing against the gun-butts. At night, I would lie awake, let my arms relax at my sides, and *think* fast drawing, sending the impulses flashing from my brain, until sleep took the imaginary guns away.

And all this time, though I was keeping the guns and cartridges well hidden, and was doing all shooting out of earshot of the house, Ma knew. Maybe it was the glances that passed between Ed and me every now and again, because Ed knew, too. Or maybe it was the way I looked at Pa's empty chair at the dinner table. But whatever it was, she saw it, and knew I was only waiting until I felt myself ready to face Mr. Wesley in the main street of Dry Creek. And I knew that she was waiting, too.

On the second Friday morning of October, I was crossing the last grease-wood flat on my way to the lonely aspen grove, when a granddaddy sage grouse catapulted into the gray morning sky before me. In response to a new reflex action, my hands flicked to my guns, and the old sage grouse dissolved in a puff of flying feathers. I ran to pick up the carcass, but found that the heavy slug had ruined most of the breast meat. Still, I was satisfied with my quick reaction and accuracy. It was then I decided that the next day, Saturday morning, I would saddle the blue roan, and ride into Dry Creek.

AT SUPPER that night, Ma was especially quiet. I had to keep my eyes on my plate, because I was afraid to look at her face. She let me finish eating, but when I rose quickly to go, her voice stopped me.

"Herb," she said pleadingly. "Why must you do this thing?"

There was no pretending I didn't know what she meant when she put it like that.

"Mr. Wesley killed Pa," I said. "He almost killed Ed, and—"

"Herb, Herb, is that enough reason to let yourself be killed?"

"I'm not going to get killed," I told her quietly. "I'm going to beat Henry Wesley."

Ma shook her head. "Vengeance is *mine,* saith the Lord—"

"I haven't seen the Lord taking any vengeance on Wesley!"

She only closed her eyes and repeated, "Vengeance is *mine,* saith the Lord."

I didn't eat breakfast that Saturday morning because I didn't want to see Ma before I left. When the chores were finished, I took the guns from behind the oat bin, saddled the roan, and started down Deadhorse Canyon towards Dry Creek. The world was gray and dead, and the threat of winter was everywhere. I thought that this was the way I felt inside: gray and dead. The winter would be a long one. I wondered how Ma would be able to get along, if Henry Wesley killed me in the shoot-out. Then I didn't let myself think about that any more.

It took longer than usual to get to Dry Creek, because I was riding slow. Still, to me, it seemed no time at all until I was hitching the roan in front of Ches Marker's store. Ches was standing in the doorway, watching me.

"I've been sort of expectin' you the last few Saturdays, Herbert," he said.

I nodded and looked up the street, toward the Dry Creek Palace Bar. Ches sensed what I was thinking, and answered my silent question.

"Wesley rode into town about twenty minutes ago. The stage hasn't come in with the mail, yet, so he's probably up t' the Palace—I wish you wouldn't do this, son."

It was the first time he had called me anything but Herbert.

"Even if you was lucky enough to beat Wesley," he went on, "I know for a fact that the Citizens' Committee aims to make an example out o' the next man who kills anybody in a shoot-out. The best you can hope for is to be run out o' Dry Creek Valley—an' you're not too young t' be strung up as an example, Herb."

I looked away again. "That means that whatever happens, Henry Wesley won't come out of this shoot-out as easy as he has before."

Ches wheezed a little. "It's a hell of a price t' pay t' get even with a man," he said.

"I guess there's not much else for me to do," I told him. "Would-you mind telling Wesley I'm here, waiting for him?"

Ches rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "I guess I can do that, Herbert," he said. "I guess I can do that for you."

As I watched him move reluctantly up the street, my mind began to move back to that other morning in early September, not two months before. I saw my father walking slowly up the center of this same street. I saw him stiffen and fall. And then it was Ed, twisting in pain, his blood soaking into the dust of the street. And then Ma was there. I saw her again, crying silently as she sat in her bentwood rocker, with the family Bible in one hand and the battered old carbine in the other. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," she had told me—but the Lord was too slow.

WESLEY came through the swinging doors of the Palace and stood on the porch a minute or so, watching me. I stepped into the street and faced him. It occurred to me then that I had never been much closer to the man than this—that I had never even spoken to the man I hoped to kill. He was a stranger to me. All I knew of him was just enough to find him when I wanted to try to kill him. But then we were moving toward each other, and I felt the heavy guns swinging slightly with every step, and I felt the thick dust scuffing under my boots, and I made myself think of nothing but out-drawing my enemy.

But again the pictures invaded my mind. My father and Ed. . . . What would Ma do if I didn't win . . . and even if I did, there was the Citizens' Committee. . . . I was almost to the Dutchman's Stables now. Wesley was still nearly fifty yards away. Why had this man never been beaten before? Better gunmen than I could ever hope to be had tried it, and where were they?

My breath was coming shorter now, and I realized that the roaring in my ears was my own pulse. My hands were shaking. Oh, God, *my hands were shaking terribly!*

(Continued on page 126)

The Ranch That Bullets Bought

By SPENCER FROST

When hombres sold the same ranch sixteen times, and dead men came to life to spend your stolen gold—it was high time, figured Tom Higgins—to cancel the old bill of sale with smoking Colts . . . or trade it for a sunny plot in Boothill!

WHETHER there was any particular cowboy heaven, Tom Higgins did not know. But he knew he was headed for the nearest thing to it. He was riding down into Sandstone Valley to take over the Rafter-A ranch which was just about the niftiest little spread that ever delighted the eye of an ambitious chaser of cows. All he had to do was plunk down ten thousand dollars while old Bill Blinco

The horse took to the brush like a frightened antelope.

was soured on the world and in the selling mood. And the Rafter-A was worth three times that amount.

In his saddle bag wrapped in yellow oil cloth and tied with a piece of whang, Tom carried the ten thousand which he had talked old Hamp Scudder into investing, though not without difficulty. Old Hamp was hard-headed. He kept recalling previous ventures which Tom had sponsored. Mary Ann chimed in to help Tom over some of the rough spots. Mary Ann knew a bargain when she heard about it, especially when it had Tom's recommendation. Why not? She was going to marry Tom when they got that spread of their own.

"It's jest another wild dream—like that gold mine that was goin' to make us rich," old Hamp growled.

"But that gold mine was all right," Mary Ann insisted. "The trouble was Tom licked the only man that knew where to find it for trying to rob a poor widow out of her share. Tom's big-hearted."

"Yeah, his heart's so big his head is soft," old Hamp retorted.

But with Mary Ann's aid Tom won the argument, and old Hamp put up the money—with very specific stipulations. If the deal turned out like Tom had pictured it, then Tom and Mary Ann should have half interest in the newly-acquired Rafter-A for themselves and their offspring for ever. But if the deal should be a flop—on this point Hamp was emphatic—and Tom lost that money like he had lost money in the past, then Hamp wanted no more of him on the HS ranch, and he would not marry Mary Ann.

Tom had learned about the Rafter-A from a long-geared cowboy named Pete Metz whom he met at the Denver stock yards where he had gone with a shipment of Hamp's cattle. Metz, not having the ten thousand to grab the bargain himself, was regretfully drifting up into Montana to a puncher job. Tom had hurried down to look over the Rafter-A. It was even a bigger bargain than the gloomy Metz had pictured it. Old Bill Blinco, eccentric, disagreeable, and at war with the big, neighboring Lazy-S, would sell Tom the Rafter-A, lock, stock and barrel, for ten thousand dollars. Cash. No checks. And with the provision that Bill was not to resell it to the arrogant Lazy-S outfit.

And now with the money in his bag, his feet in the stirrups, and his head in the clouds, Tom jogged hastily along the trail that twisted its way through the mesquite and catsclaw to the Rafter-A.

HE WAS abruptly brought to earth by the sound of a shot a short distance ahead. He spurred around a curve where the trail dipped into a timbered cut and jerked to a stop at sight of a dead man lying across the trail.

Tom knew he was dead by the awkward, crumpled-up way he was sprawled face-downward. Thirty feet away his horse was nibbling the grass. But of the man who had shot him there was neither sight nor sound.

Tom swung down and turned the fellow's head far enough to see that he was a middle-aged man with a long, thin face, a big hooked nose, and a lot of protruding teeth.

"The hombre that shot you sure didn't do it because he was jealous of your beauty," Tom muttered grimly.

He was in the act of stooping down to listen for any possible heart-beat when there came a rush of hooves behind him. Two hard-faced riders pulled up and glared at him over the muzzles of drawn six-shooters. Tom straightened up.

"The man's dead," he explained. "Some jasper jest now shot him. I heard the shot."

"Hold it, stranger. Don't make no moves toward that gun," one of the riders ordered.

The other rider, a tall, hawk-eyed man, swung down, snatched Tom's gun from

his belt, then proceeded to look the dead man over.

"It's Barb Baker! Deader'n a mackerel!" he exclaimed.

"Well, we ain't helpin him chewin' the rag here," Tom cried. "The bird that shot him can't be far ahead. Let's get goin'!"

"Take it easy, stranger," the tall man ordered. "You can't kid us. We caught you cold."

"What? Great guns, man, I didn't shoot him!" Tom cried. "I was tryin' to help him. Look at my gun. It ain't been shot."

The tall man broke Tom's gun and sniffed the barrel.

"He's right, Shorty. Loaded plumb around and no powder smell."

Shorty snorted in disbelief, dismounted, and sniffed the gun also.

"Hell, that don't mean a thing, Jake," he said. "He had plenty time to reload and to ram a wad through his gun barrel—which a smart man would do, knowin' he might git caught."

"Now hold on," Tom insisted. "I'm a stranger here. What for would I shoot a man I never saw before?"

"Yeah? What for? Shorty, hold your shooter on him while I take a look."

A search of Tom's person produced nothing of importance, but his saddle bag gave forth the oilcloth-wrapped package of currency. Tom's captors looked at each other in amazement.

"How," Jake demanded, "did you know that Barb had that money on him?"

"He didn't have it on him. I brought that money from the HS ranch to—"

A hard slap by Shorty's hand interrupted Tom.

"DON'T lie to us, stranger. Barb Baker drawed ten thousand dollars out of the bank this morning to buy the Rafter-A ranch from old Bill Blinco. Without countin' it, I'm willin' to bet my horse that there's even ten thousand dollars in that bundle. And I reckon you're goin' to tell us that you carry that amount around as pocket change."

"Y—you say this Barb feller was a goin' to buy the Rafter-A?" Tom gasped.

"He sure was — and with this very money."

"But I was goin' to buy the Rafter-A."

"Now ain't that co-in-ceedental?" Shorty sneered. "Jake, look Barb over and see if he's got that money on him."

Barb did not have.

"Well, you couldn't expect to find it," Tom snorted. "The hombre that plugged him got it, and you mugs waste your time rawhidin' me while he rides plumb outta the state."

"Feller, we're takin you in," Jake said grimly.

"Won't do you no good. I can prove who I am. Why, old Hamp Scudder can even bring the piece of oilcloth that that chunk was cut out of. The law can't hold me."

"Who said anything about the law?" Shorty demanded. "We're takin' you to the Lazy-S. Barb was foreman there. His boys has all got short tempers, and they can quick make a short rope."

"But you can't do that. I've got a right to appeal to the law."

"The Lazy-S boys is the law around here."

Jake turned to Shorty. They should take Barb in with them, he said. Shorty wondered if they ought not leave him until the sheriff came. Jake thought not. Seeing Barb in that shape was what the boys needed to help them make a quick decision.

With a chill of apprehension Tom realized the prompt and fatal consequences of being taken along with the dead man to his home ranch and branded as his killer. There was no use trying to reason with his two captors. They had decided his guilt, and as self-appointed judge and jury had passed sentence. Never at any time had Tom been considered a discreet or cautious person. He had always met condi-

tions squarely as they arose and had managed to hold his own. Now, for the first time in a not-too-mild existence, he considered the value of expediency. Shorty and Jake were arguing about the best way to take Barb's body in, and Shorty's gun was momentarily diverted from its business of keeping Tom covered. Tom kicked hard and true. At the impact the gun flew high into the air, and Tom dived for his horse.

Old Snapper, alarmed by this sudden maneuver, took to the brush like a frightened antelope. Bent low in the saddle, Tom heard bullets tear angrily through the mesquite leaves above his head. After a few hundred yards he plunged into the dry bed of a wet-weather stream. He followed it a short distance and pulled up beneath some overhanging bushes. He could hear his pursuers riding furiously through the brush. They crossed the stream bed at a reckless speed, one of them a mere hundred yards away, and passed on.

TOM cut diagonally back to the trail, striking it, he estimated, about a quarter of a mile from where the dead Baker lay. Some place ahead was the man who had killed Baker. Tom had no way of identifying him and no gun to fight with if he should, but the hope persisted that he might at least get sight of the fellow and thus have some clue to work on.

After a mile or two the trail turned down into a basin toward a ranch house. Tom recognized it as the Rafter A. He paused. Ahead was a wooded ridge that bordered the valley. If the killer had continued up there, as seemed probable, Tom knew that further search was well nigh hopeless. Meantime the Lazy S-bunch would soon start a search for a hapless puncher named Tom Higgins.

Desperately his thoughts turned to Bill Blinco. Eccentric and irascible though old Blinco was, he would know that Tom probably was telling the truth about the money, and could verify his identity and mission. Perhaps with Blinco's aid he could get the sheriff to form a posse to search for the killer. That way there might be some hope of getting the money back. He groaned at the recollection of old Hamp's warning about losing the money, and spurred old Snapper toward the Rafter-A.

The ranch house snuggled in a grove of cottonwood trees behind a heavy picket fence which was grown over with a profusion of rambler rose bushes. Off to the right and farther back stood the barn and corral and a number of sheds. The buildings were of good construction, but on every hand was evidence of neglect. A barn door sagged on one hinge, a gate, torn from its fastenings, lay flat on the ground. In the house a window gaped where a glass was broken out, and a limb blown from a cottonwood lay against the front porch. Tom had wondered why Blinco was neglecting the property that way. Perhaps it was because he was soured and intended to sell out.

The house seemed deserted. The front door was open and Tom hurried inside and followed a hallway that led to a room near the rear where Blinco had his office. As he approached the room, he heard the shuffling of feet and he stopped in the doorway face to face with Bill Blinco.

Blinco should have been expecting him, but the look of consternation on his face disputed it. Tom had slight chance to wonder at such a reception because immediately behind Blinco was the vastly more surprising sight of the long-geared Pete Metz, the puncher who had told Tom about the Rafter-A being for sale and who by his own statement should now be punching cattle in Montana.

TOM was struggling with this bewildering state of things when his startled eyes fell upon a delusion, and he shut them

to blot it out. When he opened them, the delusion stepped up beside Blinco and was exhaling cigarette smoke. It was the ugly, hook-nosed, many-toothed mug of the man called Baker whom Tom had left dead in the trail a few minutes before!

Pete Metz reached out a long arm, seized Tom by the collar and pulled him into the room.

"We wasn't really expectin' you," Pete remarked.

"You wasn't expectin' me?" Tom gasped. "My Gawd, has the world gone bughouse?"

"You oughter look fer a bullet hole when you find a dead man," Baker said in a dry monotone. "His case might not be fatal."

Anger surged through Tom. He swept Pete's hand from his collar and roughly shoved Baker back against the wall.

"All right, corpse. What's the idea of this hocus pocus?"

Then a gun barrel tapped Tom sharply on the side of the head and Pete Metz shoved him roughly into a chair.

"Folks that come a visitin' shouldn't fergit their manners," Pete remarked.

Tom clamped a hand over the fast-rising lump on his head and mentally wrestled with the terrible realization that he had been swindled. Blinco and Metz were working together! And he had done the very thing that old Hamp had warned against! The money was gone, and he himself had stumbled into a trap.

His agonizing reflections were interrupted by loud stomping and coarse laughter in the hall. Shorty and Jake surged into the door.

"Boy, boy was it a circus, haw, haw, haw!" Jake roared. "I nearly died. That simple-minded puncher swallered it hook, line, and sinker. When we let him make a break, he sure took wings."

"He was headed south," Shorty added hilariously. "You oughter seen him. He's half way to South Americy by now."

Then Shorty choked. He had caught sight of Tom. He punched Jake who did not need punching for he was already staring goggle-eyed at Tom and trying to swallow his Adam's apple.

"So you two smart birds skeered him plumb into Mexico," Pete mimicked.

"W—who brung him here?" Jake gasped.

"Aw hell," Baker growled. "I said all the time we oughter handle him like we done the others."

"Shut up," Blinco snapped. "Too many killin's won't do. You boys fell down on the job."

"Well, we've got him, what are we goin' to do with him?" Pete Metz demanded.

"Put him in with the others," Blinco ordered.

"It's safer to plant 'em," Baker objected.

"I said lock him up," Blinco snapped.

Pete and Baker led the subdued Tom through the hall and down a short flight of steps that ended on a stone floor that was blocked by a barred door. Pete opened the door and shoved Tom through, the door slammed shut and the bar clanged back into place. The room seemed dark, although there was a little window high up on each side through which a measure of daylight struggled. It seemed to be a small, rock-walled room, obviously a cellar beneath the kitchen. Then a chill of startled terror struck Tom as a bitter voice spoke from the shadows.

"Partridge, we have company to share our troubles."

THROUGH the gloom Tom saw two human-like figures rise from an old bench at the farther end of the room. One was a thick-set man with a big, florid face and a fringe of iron-gray hair framing an enormous bald pate. The other a stooped, pallid man of uncertain age. Though somewhat dishevelled, both of them appeared to be well dressed.

"What in the holy blazes are you dudes doin' here?" Tom gasped.

"I, sir, am being held a prisoner on my own property," the thick-set man declared.

"Illegally restrained and coerced," the thin man added in a high-pitched voice. "It is incredible."

"I am Phillip P. Phipps, Chicago broker," the heavy man announced. "This gentleman is my lawyer, Mr. Edgar Partridge."

"Howdy," said Tom. "I'm Tom Higgins, puncher, out of a job. What for would a broker and a lawyer be cavortin' around on the Rafter-A ranch?"

"For the very good reason that I own the place," Phipps replied warmly. "Good Lord, man, even in the wilds of Sandstone Valley a man's got a right to visit his own property."

"Whoa!" Tom cried. "You say you own the place? Then how come Bill Blinco tried to sell it to me?"

"Bill Blinco," said Phipps decisively, "is occupying this ranch under a lease contract with the former owner, Henry Yocum, who a year ago because of old age went back east to live with a daughter. I bought the ranch sight-unseen from Mr. Yocum as an investment and hobby. Two weeks ago I came here to take the place over and brought Mr. Partridge along as business and legal adviser. That rascal Blinco at first challenged my ownership, and when I proved it, he had his thugs throw us in here. He has brutally refused to explain his action or to communicate with us at all."

Tom let out a loud groan.

"What's the matter?" Phipps asked. "Don't you feel well?"

"I feel awful. And the more I learn about Blinco the worse I feel. I've been gypped. I've lost everything I had in the world—includin' my girl."

"But it isn't legal," Partridge chimed in. "Wait until I haul all those thugs into court."

"Old Hamp don't give a hang about the legality," Tom moaned. "He warned me not to get fleeced, and that's jest what I done."

"I'll prosecute Blinco to the highest court in the land," Partridge declared stoutly. "I'll see that he spends the rest of his days in prison."

"Does Blinco know that?" Tom asked.

"I've sent him word every time the men bring the food."

"That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"The worried look on Blinco's face."

"We have considered breaking out," said Phipps. "But there is not a weak spot in the room. With proper tools one might enlarge those peepholes that serve as windows, but we have no tools."

"This messenger boy that brings the grub," said Tom. "How often does he show up?"

"Each morning and evening. One man with a pistol in his belt brings us a tray of food. Another man with a gun in his hand stands in the doorway."

"Well, there's two of them and there's three of us. How about teamin' up on 'em for a git-away?"

"Are you suggesting that we attack those armed men?" Partridge gasped in a horrified tone.

"I'm afraid that you forget that we two are not fighters, Mr. Higgins," said Phipps. "I am a broker, wholly unaccustomed to physical violence, and Mr. Partridge is a lawyer—not a criminal lawyer but a corporation lawyer."

"Even a rabbit will fight a snake," said Tom. "But of course if you birds ain't interested in gittin' out—"

"But we are interested, Mr. Higgins. If you can liberate us I shall see that you are handsomely rewarded."

"You have our strongest moral support, sir," said Partridge. "We wish you success."

"Indeed we do," Phipps declared. "And

to prove that is no idle talk, I'll gladly deed you half interest in the Rafter-A ranch the very hour you deliver us from this filthy hole."

"You'll—huh? Well, I'll be a ringtail wampus cat! You birds are sure side-kicks to tie to! Half interest! And what in the name of the grand exalted post hole is a—are you goin' to do with the other half?"

"Very well, I shall not quibble over trifles, Mr. Higgins," Phipps declared. "I'll deed you the whole ranch including the livestock and equipment. But it is distinctly understood that you are to deliver us unscathed from this place."

TOM was breathless for a moment. He sat down on the bench. "Gents, I see we don't talk the same language. Mebbe you don't understand. We're up against a gang of killers. They're usin' this ranch as bait to draw suckers. When a man rides in with the dough to buy the ranch, they bump him off. How many they've done that to I don't know, but enough that Blinco is gettin' skeered of killin's, so they tried a different scheme on me. They tried to skeer me outta the country. They got my money, all right; but instead of headin' fer Mexico I landed up here in this cellar. Now I've gotta git out."

"They've got guns," Partridge gasped.

"They've also got ten thousand dollars that Hamp Scudder warned me not to lose," said Tom. "Partridge, gimme the loan of your shirt."

It seemed that an age passed before there came a rattling of the door bolt and Jake with a drawn six-shooter stepped inside. Baker followed with a tray of food.

"Here you are, Bob White. Come and git it," Baker announced.

A lank looking, stooped figure shuffled forward and reached for the tray. Suddenly a knee shot upward. It struck the tray with a bang and the contents erupted into Baker's hook-nosed face. A hand shot out and plucked the gun from Baker's holster. Jake yelled a warning as he saw that it was Tom wearing Partridge's shirt and imitating Partridge's stoop who had reached for the tray, and he tried to throw his gun into action. But the floundering

Tom stepped into the kitchen. . . .

Barb Baker was directly in front of Tom.

Tom's purloined gun barked and Baker folded in the middle. Tom then smashed the gun barrel down on Baker's head, snatched up Jake's fallen gun from the floor, paused to see that Baker was completely knocked out, then with a gun in each hand he raced for the steps.

Blinco and Shorty already were racing down the hall, Shorty flourishing a six-shooter and Blinco carrying a rifle which he evidently had snatched up in his office. Tom dropped upon the steps with only his head showing above the floor line, thus presenting a difficult target which a bullet from Shorty's gun missed by many inches. Tom drew a bead and fired. Shorty turned half way around, sagged against the wall, but stayed on his feet.

Blinco's rifle barked twice. He was firing wildly from the hip. One at a time, Tom's two guns barked. Blinco dropped the rifle, staggered a few steps, and sprawled. Shorty was trying to raise his gun, but his arm seemed paralyzed. Tom lifted his weapon but did not fire. Even in the stress of the fight he could not shoot a helpless man. He ran ahead and with a blow of his gun barrel laid Shorty down beside Blinco.

Tom calculated rapidly. Pete Metz alone remained unaccounted for, Pete, undoubtedly the most dangerous of the gang. Thanks to the element of surprise, the going thus far had been easy, but Metz would be warned and trigger-alert.

THE house had become deathly quiet, like the sudden hush after a clap of thunder. Some place Tom could hear the ticking of a clock, and from the corral the bawling of a calf sounded loud in the silence. Tom tip-toed down the hall toward the kitchen. Beyond it the outside door was open, and through that open door he caught a flash of movement, brief and indistinct, but real enough that he knew it was the long-legged Metz racing to the house from the barn. Evidently Metz had been looking after his horse and was attracted by the gunfire.

Tom stepped into the kitchen and crouched beside the door. After a moment he caught the sound of cautious footsteps. He peered around the door facing. Metz was hugging the wall as he came down the hall, and at sight of Tom he threw himself flat on the floor. The bark of his gun blended with Tom's and his bullet threw a splinter from the door facing into Tom's face.

Tom peered around the door and tried another shot and in turn got fanned by another of Metz's bullets. And now with genuine consternation he realized why neither of his shots had hit Metz. The crafty puncher had dropped flat behind the sprawled body of Bill Blinco, and Tom was really pumping shots into a dead man.

Tom had lost the advantage. And a man with his life, his reputation, and his girl at stake is entitled to some odds when fighting a skunk like Metz. There were odds all right, but now they were on the wrong side.

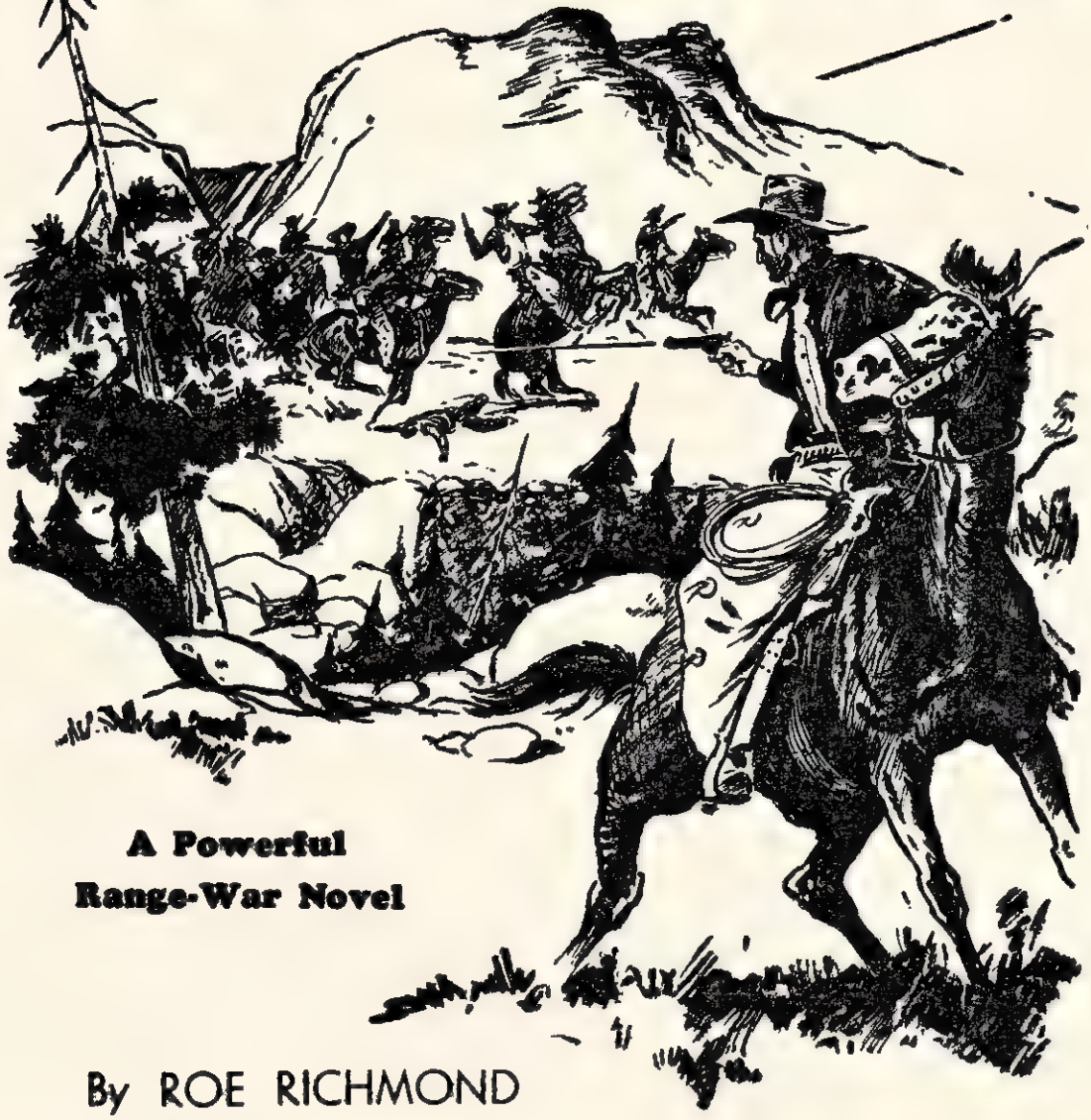
A nerve-breaking silence laid hold upon the place. A sudden noise caused Tom to jump violently. But it was only the stomp of a horse's hoof as the animal fought the flies outside. Tom glanced around nervously. It is a bad sign when a man contracts a case of jitters in a gun fight. Through the kitchen door he could see the two horses which Jake and Shorty had ridden standing under a scrub oak twenty feet from the kitchen door. He might grab one of those horses and make a run for it.

For a moment he considered the possibility of flight, but he quickly discarded it. His eyes narrowed calculatingly. A row of pans hung on the kitchen wall near at hand. Carefully he seized a pan, stepped noiselessly to the door and hurled the pan at the nearest horse. It struck the animal high on the rump, glanced and hit the saddle with a bang and clatter. The horses snorted, plunged, and with a loud pounding of hooves raced toward the barn. Tom stepped quickly behind the kitchen door.

The next instant Metz rushed out of

(Continued on page 127)

When the Gun-Pack Turns!



A Powerful Range-War Novel

By ROE RICHMOND

A hard-fisted man like Roskenny, with fire in his blood and iron in his guts, can build a cattle empire with his own two hands. But when the killers he hired to hold it turn on him like a wolf pack on its wounded leader, how can he expect help from the same men he himself has broken?

Caught in the open, the rustlers were thrown into terrible confusion.

CHAPTER ONE

Friend to No Man

"BUT the army pays a hundred-fifty a head," Bohannon said, frowning and spitting tobacco juice through the corral rails. "I never figured you'd hold me up like this, Ros."

Roskenny smiled soberly. "It's business, Bo. The army's not buyin'. Nobody's buyin' hereabouts but me. Eighty's my top price." Roskenny was a big, broad-shouldered man, solid and serenely sure of himself, his dark features rugged and rough-hewn, his eyes gray and cold.

"I sure hate to let them horses go for that." Bohannon studied the other with

sun-squinted blue eyes that were faded and tired. His lean red face was cut with deep lines, worn and weary, and his long spare frame slumped. "If them damn rustlers hadn't hit me I'd never do it. As it is I ain't got much choice."

Roskenny shrugged indifferently. "It's up to you, Bo."

Young Neely Bohannon kicked the sun-baked soil. "To hell with him, Dad! Don't sell for that. We can do better somewhere else." Neely was still in his 'teens, a tall limber boy with a keen face, wild blue eyes, and sunbleached brown hair. He stood with thumbs hooked into gun-belt and glared hatred at the great bulk of Roskenny, who was half-amused.

"We ain't got time, Neely," his father said. "It's a crime, but we got to let 'em go." Bohannon shook his head and turned to Roskenny. "It don't seem right, Ros. You and me was friends. Our fathers was friends."

"Things change, Bo," said Roskenny. "The world moves ahead. Some move with it, and others stand still."

"I'll stand still," Bohannon murmured. "If a man has to tread on everybody else to get ahead I'll stay back where I am."

"It's your privilege to choose," Roskenny said. "It's a deal then? Twenty-four hundred for the thirty horses I picked."

"I reckon," Bohannon said dully. Then a sudden light flared in his washed-out blue eyes. "But you ain't always goin' to get away with this, Ros. You ain't God!"

Roskenny laughed quietly. "No, I'm just a business man, Bo."

Neely edged forward with narrowed eyes and taut lips. "Your business is done here, mister. Get out!"

Roskenny regarded the boy with mild surprise and glanced at the father. "Neely's gettin' kind of big for his britches, Bo."

"Big enough for you and Harry Humboldt," Neely said scornfully. "Or them gunslicks you got, Corsson and Buell."

"I doubt it, son," said Roskenny. "I wouldn't be gettin' ideas if I was you. Kids that get ornery are apt to die young in this country."

Neely stepped forward swearing, but his father stopped him with a long arm across the chest. "Drift along, Neely," Bohannon said gently but firmly. "Leave it lay now, boy."

With a last bitter look at Roskenny the boy wheeled and strode away toward the ranch house. Both men watched his long loose-jointed figure cross the yard. Roskenny said:

"That kid's ridin' for a fall, Bo."

"Neely can take care of himself," Bohannon said. "He's pretty mad today. You'd be mad if you lost a whole herd of prime beef, I reckon."

Roskenny nodded. "This rustlin's got to be put down."

"If it is us ranchers'll have to do it. Sheriff Swett ain't no help."

"I thought he was all right, Bo."

"For you people in town maybe. He's no good to us on the range."

"Well, I got to be gettin' along," Roskenny said, walking toward his big blue roan in the shade of the stable. "The boys'll pick up the horses tomorrow. I'll send the money out with them."

Bohannon nodded, munching thoughtfully on his chew. "You ever get lonesome, Ros?" he drawled.

Roskenny looked sharply at him and laughed. "Only fools get lonesome. I'm too busy, Bo. I don't need anybody else. What makes you ask that?"

"I just wondered," Bohannon said. "Most men think of gettin' married at your age, if they ain't hitched early like I was. Thought maybe you and Edna Howison might try it."

Roskenny swung into the saddle, moving lithe and easy for such a big man. "No, Edna's too valuable in the office. I need her there more'n I need a wife."

"Couldn't Honest Harry Humboldt

handle the books? Wouldn't that work?"

Roskenny smiled bleakly. "Not like Edna. I'd just soon he didn't anyway." He raised a huge hand in farewell, kneed the horse around, and rode out along the trail toward the town of Stockade.

Bohannon squinted after him. "Him and me was like brothers once. His dad and mine fought the Apaches together and helped open up this territory." Bohannon squirted a long vicious stream of tobacco juice across the ground. "It beats hell what money will do to a man."

LAVENDER shadows lengthened on the plain and deepened to purple as the sun sank flaming behind the jagged western peaks. The air grayed with dusk as the lurid colors paled and died out along the horizon, and the Kiowa River flowed slow silver beside the twilight trail.

Roskenny was well-satisfied with the afternoon's work. He had acquired thirty fine horses at one-half their actual worth. The poorest would bring one-fifty and some of them would go for two hundred dollars. He should realize a profit of about three thousand, and that wasn't bad for a leisurely day's endeavor. He supposed he should feel sorry for Bohannon, but some people were born to be poor, to stand still in life, and Bo was one of them.

Of course that rustling was bad business, an awful blow to Bohannon. But so far they hadn't touched any of Roskenny's stock, and until they did he couldn't be too concerned. A man had to hold onto his own in this world. The weak went under and the strong rose to the top where they belonged.

"Lonesome!" Roskenny snorted the word aloud as he rode. That was the trouble with most men, they were dependent on others, insufficient in themselves. Like Bohannon, taking a wife at twenty, tying himself down before he hardly started to live. Mary had been a mighty pretty girl, and she was probably a good wife, but it was a handicap to a man just the same. Roskenny had tried to court Mary Hale himself, but she could see nobody but Bohannon. He wondered idly if she ever regretted her choice as she watched the Roskenny fortune grow while the Bohannons struggled always on the ragged edge of poverty. She must if she was human, he thought.

Roskenny surveyed himself and his life with the satisfaction of a ruthless, powerful man. He had been a lone wolf since early maturity and he was proud of it. He had made his way alone, fighting with his bare hands or a gun when necessary, asking nothing from anybody and granting no quarter to those he trampled over.

His only regret was that, in a rare moment of weakness, he had taken Harry Humboldt into partnership with him. Still the business had expanded too much for one man to run it alone, even a man like Roskenny. And Harry had more than paid his way, increasing the profits, handling the small routine details that irked Roskenny. Yes, in a way he was lucky to have Harry Humboldt, and he was more than lucky to have a woman in the office like Edna Howison. It wasn't often you found such a handsome woman who had brains, too. Edna was smart all right, and she was loyal. Even though he had shied away from the marriage she wanted, Edna was loyal to him, one hundred per cent.

For the two assistant managers Roskenny had little use. Lyle Corsson and Billy Buell were nothing but strong-arm boys and expert gun-fighters, but as Humboldt had pointed out they were needed in the organization. They kept the teamsters and workers in line, and put the fear of God into rival dealers and freighters. When they had to shoot somebody it was always self-defense. Sheriff Swett was very cooperative in these cases. But Roskenny sometimes thought Corsson and Buell killed out of sheer boredom. He felt that, if he ever weakened himself, they

would turn their guns on him in an instant. It was something like having two rattlesnakes for pets.

Red Starr, the quiet, freckled little horse wrangler, was the best man in the outfit, and the only person besides Edna Howison that Roskenny had any real liking for. There was something reassuring about the slim bowlegged rider that warmed Roskenny. But he never let on to Red. Roskenny was cold, remote and impersonal in all his affairs. He needed nobody or nothing outside of himself, he often declared.

DUSK was thickening as Roskenny approached the ford at the Horseshoe Bend in the Kiowa. The blue roan pulled up skittishly at the water's edge. Roskenny cursed impatiently and tried to urge the horse forward with his knees. When that failed he used the spurs with vicious anger, and the roan leaped ahead and splashed into the current. It was a treacherous crossing bedded with slippery stones, but Roskenny kept rowelling his mount with the cruel spurs. The roan reared and plunged, falling suddenly and pitching the rider into the stream. As the water swirled over him Roskenny heard the snap of breaking bone and the high scream of the steed.

Heaving himself upright and fighting the current, blowing water and oaths from his mouth, Roskenny saw the broken-legged horse floundering back in the shallows and still screaming. "You damned fool!" panted Roskenny, wading for shore, sliding and stumbling on the slick uneven bottom. Hasty examination revealed that the left foreleg was ruined, and there was nothing to do but shoot the animal.

Roskenny had ridden the roan for three or four years, but all he felt was anger as he drew the Colt .44 from its holster. "What the hell got into you all of a sudden?" he demanded, planting the muzzle and pressing the trigger. Blue Boy reared high and collapsed heavily against the riverbank. Roskenny removed the saddle and the Winchester .44-40, swearing as he did so, shivering in his soaked clothes and thinking of the long hike into town. Horses were part of his business and Roskenny had a certain admiration and respect for them, but no more love than he had for his fellow-men. He had lost two hundred dollars here and he had to walk the rest of the way into Stockade. It was a damned uncomfortable unpleasant nuisance.

Carrying the saddle and rifle Roskenny plunged in to wade across the Kiowa. "That damn fool horse could've waited until he got to the other side before he broke his leg," the big man grumbled as the cool water tugged at his thighs and washed about his hips. "I might've cracked my skull on a rock, too. Wouldn't that have been a hell of a note?"

The night came, cold and sudden, chilling through his wetness into flesh and bone. The abrupt change after his long hot ride left his teeth chattering and his body shuddering. Roskenny was raging mad but not in the least worried. He had always been healthy, strong and tough as a steer. A little ducking wouldn't hurt him any. It was just irritating and annoying.

Roskenny walked as fast as he could to keep warm. He found that his wind was short and his arm ached from the dragging weight of the saddle. He wasn't so young any more, he realized with a slight shock, he was close to forty now. It made him shiver with something beside the cold.

A crescent moon hung in the sky, and the vast reaches glittered with stars. The smell of sage and sand came to Roskenny, and in the distance coyotes barked and wolves howled. A strange lost feeling of loneliness overtook him, and he wondered vaguely if Bohannon had put some kind of a curse on him. Perhaps from this point on everything would go wrong and bad for him. Fate had been kind to him, but it could change and turn as swiftly as the wind.

THE miles stretched endlessly in the night, and Roskenny was frozen through and reeling with weariness. When he stopped to rest the cold struck into his vitals. It seemed as if he had been walking forever, alone under the tilted moon and the scattered stars. Queer fantasies began to shimmer in his mind. Maybe he had died back there in the river and this was his purgatory, to walk always on and on and get nowhere, to stumble along for eternity in the boundless empty night.

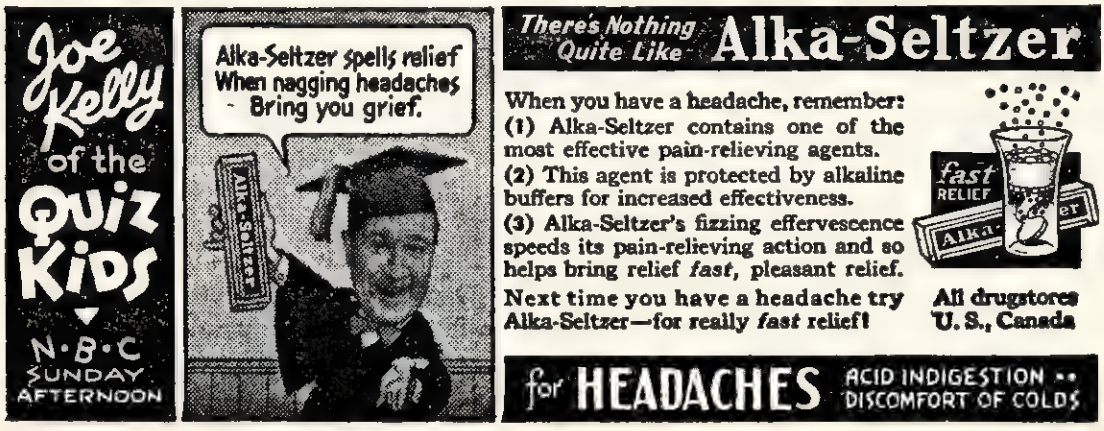
He started feeling sorry for Bohannon, his boyhood friend, for Edna, whom he should have married, for all the half-forgotten men he had broken and humbled and killed. He was afraid he was going crazy then, for he'd never wasted any time on sympathy. He thought of his mother and father for the first time in years. Childhood scenes flickered through his fevered mind. . . . Must be he was going to die. They said that a man's past came back to him when he was dying. Terror and dread filled Roskenny until he felt like screaming, but when he opened his dry mouth no sound came forth. There would be nobody to hear anyway, nothing but the prairie dogs and wolves and jackass rabbits.

The cry of wolves seemed closer now. Perhaps they smelled death on him and were stalking until he dropped. A vast anger flamed up in him. To hell with them, he wasn't going to drop. He could walk all night and all day if he had to. There was no limit to his strength and endurance and will. Big Bert Roskenny could whip anybody on earth, overcome any obstacle, surmount all difficulties, lick the world if need be. Roskenny would never die, not for a long long time anyway. . . . He staggered on mumbling to himself.

It was late when he stumbled into Stockade on numb and lifeless legs. There were still lights in a couple of saloons, the Gold Nugget and the Prairie Queen, but nobody was in sight on the street and Roskenny was relieved. A horseman on foot had no dignity. He didn't want anyone to see him tramping into town like a desert rat. Too many people would enjoy that spectacle. Like a fugitive he crept toward the Stock House where he had a room. All he needed was a good night's sleep.

In the room he lighted a lamp with trembling fingers and then fell exhausted across the bed. It was some time before he could summon the energy to get up, pour himself a large drink of whiskey, and peel off his damp soggy clothing. He was shaking like a man with the ague, but another drink warmed him somewhat.

Roskenny blew out the lamp and tumbled into bed. He should have been hungry but he was too tired to even think of eating. Whiskey was the thing at a time like this. He had no patience with social drinking, but the stuff did have its place. It soothed and lulled him now, and in a short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time Roskenny was snoring. But his sleep that night was troubled, crowded with weird dreams and hideous visions, and occasionally he gasped and cried out as he wrestled with the phantoms of darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

The Vultures Gather

IN THE morning Roskenny woke up burning, his mouth and throat parched dry. A few minutes later he was freezing to death, his teeth rattling together, his limbs twitching and trembling uncontrollably. When the chill passed he immediately began blazing again, writhing in red-hot torment, sweating all over.

"What the hell is this?" panted Roskenny, forcing himself upright and easing his legs over the side of the bed. Slowly, uncertainly, he stood up and started to walk across the floor, but his legs folded limply under him and he stretched out full length on the worn boards. It was quite awhile before he could crawl back and climb weakly onto the bed. His heart was hammering and his head felt light and giddy.

He lay there for a long time listening to the rasping wheeze of his own breath and railing silently at his helplessness. He had never been sick before, and he didn't know what to make of this. It didn't seem possible it could have happened to him. After all he had been through—the gun battles and brutal brawls, the hell of desert heat and the icy fury of winter storms, days and nights of raw exposure without food, long wilderness trails, prairie and forest fires, cattle stampedes and stage-coach hold-ups—it was now ridiculous to be laid low simply because a horse fell and doused him in a creek. It was disgusting beyond words.

Why doesn't someone come? Roskenny wondered. *Where the hell is everybody? A man could die here and nobody would know or care.*

It occurred to him all of a sudden that there was nobody in the world who really cared whether Bert Roskenny lived or died anyway. Who was there to mourn if he should die today? Edna Howison, a little perhaps. Red Starr, maybe but not much. After yesterday Bohannon wouldn't give a damn, and Neely would be glad of it. . . . There was no one really, not a single soul. The realization struck horror through him, and despair.

And what about all the money he had made and saved? He hadn't anybody to leave it to. The banks and the lawyers and Harry Humboldt would get it all somehow. That was another sickening and terrifying thought. Again he heard Bohannon's drawling voice: *"You ever get lonesome, Ros. . . .?"* He had never understood how empty and barren and lonely his life was. He had cut himself off from humanity, repulsing those who tried to be friendly, riding roughshod over the rest.

The bedclothes were soaked from his sweating, and when the chills came they turned to ice against his shuddering body. Familiar objects in the room looked strange and distorted in the haze that clouded his vision. He was worn out from the alternate shivering cold and scorching heat. His head felt ready to burst and his stomach churned nauseatingly. It grew worse as it went along until Roskenny decided that death would be welcome. Anything to escape from this wracking torture.

But why didn't somebody come to see what was the matter with him? Even if they didn't care about him, there was such a thing as human decency. He needed a doctor. He never needed one before except for gunshot wounds, but he sure as hell needed one now.

Hours of agony must have passed before he heard someone in the hall and yelled until they came to the door. "Get Doc Newell," he told whoever it was. "Get him up here fast."

"What's the trouble, Mr. Roskenny?" a timid male voice inquired.

"None of your damned business!" Roskenny hollered. "Get the doctor."

DR. NEWELL arrived about twenty minutes later. It seemed like two hours to Roskenny and he cursed the nervous young physician for taking so long. Newell examined him with a worried frown and told him he was a very sick man and would have to remain in bed for a week or ten days, perhaps two weeks.

"Hell's hinges!" said Roskenny. "I can't stay in bed like that, man. I've got too much to do. I never been sick a day in my life. I never stayed in bed unless I was shot up some. Give me somethin' to put me on my feet, Doc."

Newell shook his sleek prematurely balding head. "I can give you something to reduce the fever and make you rest comfortable, Roskenny. But only time and complete rest will put you on your feet."

Roskenny swore violently. "I got to get up. I'll go crazy lyin' here. Damn it all, you're supposed to be a doctor!"

"Didn't you try to get up this morning?" asked Newell. He smiled at Roskenny's nod. "I thought so. And what happened?" Roskenny refused to respond. The doctor went on: "I know, you keeled over. There's your answer, Roskenny."

The doctor administered several kinds of medicine and left a supply with directions for taking it. "I'll tell the cook downstairs what to fix for you," Newell said cheerfully. "It'll be mostly soups and broths for a few days. I'll be around to see you tomorrow. The easier you take it now the sooner you'll be up around. Anything else you want?"

"Get word to Harry Humboldt, Doc. Tell him I want to see him."

Newell smiled and shook his head. "Not today. I'll let him come up tomorrow. Try and forget all about business for awhile."

Roskenny cursed him roundly. "Send me up somethin' to read then. Hellfire, a man might as well be in jail!"

Newell nodded and made his departure. Roskenny sank back on the pillows in deep disgust.

It was three days before Roskenny saw anyone but the doctor, and he was too sick to care. He thought sure he was dying. He felt all alone, unwanted, unneeded and afraid. It was an awful thing to die like a stray dog without a mortal being to mourn for him. His life, that he had been so proud of, was in reality a wasted and futile thing. Roskenny's mental anguish exceeded the physical misery. But on the third day there was a release from suffering and his head cleared.

His first two visitors were the last two people in Stockade that Roskenny wanted to see: Lyle Corsson and Billy Buell. It apparently pleased them to see the big boss flat and helpless on his back, and they gloated slyly all the time they were there. Corsson was a broad hulking man with a scarred broken-beaked face, evil eyes, and an ugly buck-toothed mouth. Buell was smaller but fully as tough, stocky and compact, with a rather pleasant smiling face and cold contemptuous eyes.

"Where the hell is Humboldt?" asked Roskenny.

"Had to go outa town on business," Corsson said. "Said for you not to worry about nothin'."

"I want you to go out to Bohannon's and bring in thirty horses I'm buyin'." Roskenny paused to concentrate. "Take three thousand dollars, I'm payin' Bo a hundred a head." They're still a bargain at a hundred, he reflected. And the extra hundred'll help Bo and his family. . . . Anything new, boys?" inquired Roskenny.

"No," Buell said. "Pretty quiet. You can rest easy, Chief. It sure seems funny to see you laid up though."

"Yeah, it's funny," said Roskenny. "Like a funeral. Tell Edna I'd like to see her, will you?" He waved a dismissal.

They reminded him of vultures waiting for somebody to die. It was strange that Humboldt would leave town without seeing him.

EDNA HOWISON called that evening, a tall blonde woman with a fine clear face and poised assurance. She was tall and straight, superbly built and graceful, a handsome figure of womanhood.

"I wanted to come sooner, Bert," Edna said. "I didn't know if it would be quite proper."

Roskenny snorted. "Don't worry about that, Edna. Is everything all right with the business?"

She said it was and they talked about various ventures and enterprises for a time, with Edna sitting in a chair by the bed. Finally Roskenny reached out and took her slim cool hand in his own large rough paw.

"I been doin' a lot of thinkin' here, Edna," he said. "You and I ought to get married. We should've done it long before this. It was my fault, I—I was a damn fool."

Her face didn't light up as he had expected it to. She looked startled and worried, almost frightened. Her hand remained in his but he could feel her quick instinctive withdrawal. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Why, nothing," she protested. "Nothing at all, Bert. It was such a surprise, that's all. You told me once you'd never marry."

Roskenny laughed harshly. "I was mule-headed. It took a jolt like this to smarten me up, Edna. What do you say to gettin' hitched?"

"I—I don't know, Bert." Her voice was a little shaky. "I'm afraid it's just because you're sick. You'll feel different when you're really yourself again."

Roskenny shook his dark gray-streaked head. "I know what I want. It's you, Edna."

She lowered her eyes. "I—I'll have to think it over, Bert. Let's wait until you're better."

"Damnation!" he said. "What is there to think about? We've waited too long already."

Edna Howison had recovered her composure now, and she smiled at him and pressed his fingers. "Sickness does strange things to people, Bert," she said gently. "Sometimes it makes big strong men feel like little boys again. I want you to ask me when you're up and around, feeling fit and well once more. Then I'll know you really mean it, Bert. When you ask it now, I don't know."

"All right, Edna." He sighed and relaxed on the pillows. "I can see your point and we'll wait. But I won't change my mind any."

She slipped her hand out of his. "I've got to be going, Bert. The doctor warned me not to stay too long. You're still very weak."

"Keep your eye on Harry and those two buzzards of his," Roskenny said. "With me down like this they might get ideas. You're the only one in the outfit I can trust thoroughly, Edna. I don't know about Harry at all."

She smiled brightly at him as she rose. "Don't worry about a thing, Bert. I believe Harry Humboldt is a better man than you think. All that Corsson and Buell know how to do is fight, but they aren't foolish enough to fight you. Don't worry about it."

Edna Howison turned at the door to smile and wave back. Roskenny watched her go with unusual warmth in his sunken gray eyes.

It was a mistake to ask her when I'm down like this, he decided ruefully. A man should be up on his feet and in fighting trim when he goes a-courting. You don't want a woman feeling sorry for you. You want her looking up to you with pride shining in her eyes.

HARRY HUMBOLDT arrived the next day, tall and immaculate, suave and smiling, his rich auburn hair pomaded slickly, the darker mustache neatly trimmed, his teeth flashing white in the charming manner that did not match the shrewd hardness of his green eyes. He was all apologies for not having called sooner and heartily reassuring about the business.

Roskenny shut off the smooth flow of words with a sharp gesture. "What was so important you had to take a trip without seein' me, Harry?"

"I wasn't going to tell you until you felt better," Humboldt said. "But if you insist, Bert. . . . We lost a whole wagon-train of freight in Aroostock Pass."

Roskenny straightened up in bed and his jaw jutted. "You figure it's the same gang that's been rustlin' cattle?"

"Could be, Bert. Like the rustlers, they disappeared without a trace."

"Get Swett off his fat butt then," Roskenny said. "He's supposed to do somethin' besides loaf around town. Swett never did give a damn what happened outside of Stockade. The ranchers'll never vote him in again unless he gets busy."

"He's out after them now, Bert."

"And hopin' he don't find 'em," said Roskenny. "I wondered how long it'd be before they hit us. As soon as I get laid up they start. What else has gone wrong?"

Humboldt smiled soothingly and shook his head. "Nothing else, Bert. I tripled the guards on our other trains. The outlaws will think twice before tackling them."

"What's Buell and Corsson doin' besides leanin' on the bar in the Nugget or the Queen?"

Humboldt's smile was patient, tolerant, and faintly superior. "They've got a posse out beating the brush, too."

"All right, all right," growled Roskenny. "I'm kinda jumpy, I reckon. This lyin' in bed is no good for a man like me."

"How soon'll you be up, Bert?"

"The doc says another week. But I'll be out before then, Harry."

"Better listen to the doctor and not try to get around too early," warned Humboldt. "I'll take care of everything, Bert. No need of your worrying at all. Get a good rest while you can, you deserve one."

"All right, Harry," Roskenny said. "I'm trustin' you, pardner."

Humboldt smiled his most winning smile. "I'm proud to hear that, Bert."

THE following afternoon Roskenny was glad to see Red Starr appear in the doorway, but he carefully concealed his pleasure from the little horse wrangler. Starr was slender, wiry, tough as rawhide, with a thin freckled boyish face and clear amber eyes, a fiery crest of hair.

"Well, you got any news, Red?" asked Roskenny.

"Not much," Starr drawled softly. "And none of it good."

"Talk!" Roskenny ordered impatiently. "Damn it all I wanta know what's goin' on around here."

"Another load of freight stood up in Alameda Canyon, Ros."

The big man's face twisted murderously. "That's good news! That's the only kinda news I get these days. When a man's down everythin' piles up on him. How'd you like those horses of Bohannon's?"

"Haven't seen 'em, Ros. The boys said the deal fell through. Bo wouldn't sell."

Roskenny reared up straight in the bed, his huge fists clubbing the mattress. "There's somethin' rotten in this outfit all of a sudden. I can smell it from here."

"I reckon you're right, Ros," said Red Starr.

"Red, I want you to dust out and see Bohannon yourself."

"Humboldt told me to stick around the corral, Ros."

"To hell with Humboldt! I'm still run-

nin' this show, Red. You fork a horse and get out to Bo's place. And watch yourself, Red. There's goin' to be some shootin' around here before long, I got a feelin'."

Red Starr grinned and patted the low-slung sheath on his right thigh. "I'm ready, Ros. I been ready quite a spell now."

"Good boy," said Roskenny. "How's Edna takin' all this?"

"I don't know, Ros," drawled Red. "Haven't had a chance to see her alone. Humboldt's always hangin' round in there."

Roskenny sighed. "I can see I've got to get up and outa here, Red. Doctor or no doctor. Everythin' it took me a life time to build up is goin' to pieces in a week."

Red Starr nodded understandingly. "I'll be gettin' along out to Bo's."

"I told Corsson and Buell to pay him a hundred apiece," Roskenny said. "I'm sure Bo would've sold for that; he was ready to let 'em go for less."

"I buried Blue Boy at the Horseshoe," Starr said, quietly irrelevant.

"Thanks, Red."

"A good horse, Ros."

"Yes, he was," said Roskenny, and for the first time he was saddened to think the blue roan was gone. He remembered now that Red had been with him when they caught that herd of wild horses Blue Boy had been running with up in the Pinals.

Roskenny stared at the door for some time after it closed behind Red Starr. In the depths of his illness Roskenny had decided to change and live a different life, if and when he recovered. He would marry Edna, be friendly to those who merited it and more tolerant to the others. . . . But events were transpiring against him and any such transformation. It looked as if he might be stepping into the hardest fight of his life when he rose from this bed.

Ever since his visit to Bohannon a sense of something wrong and a premonition of disaster had been growing in Roskenny. Now he was as certain of it as if he had observed tangible and indisputable evidence.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Trap

ALL the way out along the Kiowa Red Starr was thinking of Roskenny. He had liked the big man ever since that expedition into the Pinal Mountains after wild horses. On the trail Roskenny had loosened up a little, and Red had come to know him for the first time. Red had saved the big man's life once when a wild stallion threatened it. On the way home Roskenny had returned the favor when Red was on the verge of being killed in a barroom brawl. They had never become intimate; they were never as close in town as they had been out in the open country. But Red Starr liked the big man that so many people hated. And he knew that, even though he tried to hide it, Roskenny was rather fond of him.

Roskenny was in trouble now, more trouble than he realized, and he was a gaunt lone wolf against the pack. The big man had been too high and mighty for too long. Everybody wanted to see him broken down and beaten into the dirt, everyone except Red Starr and maybe Edna Howison.

Red couldn't bear the sleek smooth Harry Humboldt, and every time he saw Buell and Corsson his trigger finger itched. There were others in the organization too, lesser gunmen who took their orders from those three: Drisko, Cuddy, Gammill, Heeken, and Symes, all killers. Something was going on under the surface. It had started the moment Roskenny fell sick. In the ultimate showdown Red Starr didn't see how Roskenny had a chance in the world, but he intended to be along side of the big man when it came, whatever the odds were.

As he rode Red had the feeling he was being watched and followed, but he couldn't spot anything. He tried to dismiss it as nerves but the uncomfortable sensation persisted. Somewhere along the wooded ridges that paralleled the valley roughly on either side were riders with their eyes focused on him.

The feeling faded away as he neared the Bohannon spread, but it was a relief just the same to pull into the yard. Young Neely came to the door of the ranch house with a rifle in his hands, but his lean face relaxed when he saw who it was.

"Oh, hullo, Red," he greeted, coming outside as Red stepped down and led his horse toward the water-trough in the stable shade.

"You expectin' company, Neely?" drawled Red, glancing at the rifle.

"You can't tell these days," Neely said grimly.

Red Starr rolled a cigarette while his horse drank water. Bohannon hailed him and walked out of the stable to join them, a rifle in under his arm, his red face losing some of its strained tautness.

"I ain't lookin' for a fight, Bo," protested Red, grinning.

Bohannon smiled and shifted his tobacco. "There's them that are though," he remarked dryly. "How's the big fellah, Red?"

"Comin' along pretty fair," Red said. "He was a sick man all right. Wanted me to ask you what happened to them horses, Bo."

"Nothin'—yet," said Bohannon. "They come out and offered me fifty a head. I was goin' to let 'em go for eighty, but I'd starve before I sold 'em for fifty, Red."

Red Starr whistled softly. "Don't blame you, Bo. Ros ain't goin' to like that any. He told 'em to pay a hundred."

"So they've started stackin' the deck on the big fellah?" murmured Bohannon. "I been expectin' it right along."

"So've I," Red said.

"It serves Roskenny right," Neely muttered. "They can take him for all he's got and I won't cry no tears."

"Wait a minute, son," said Bohannon. "Ros has got his faults, but he's a better man than Humboldt and them gun-sharps of his."

"I don't see no difference," Neely said stubbornly. "All scavengers look alike to me."

They all looked up as the rapid drum of hoofs came on the sunlit air.

A LONE rider was coming in hell-for-leather in a saffron cloud of dust. "It's Riggs," Neely said, eyes squinted nearly shut. "Looks like he's been shot." The horse pounded into the yard and the cowhand slid awkwardly from the saddle, holding his right arm against his body. The shoulder and upper sleeve of his shirt were soaked darkly with blood, and his powder-stained face was gray under the tan.

"They got—the horses," panted Riggs. "And they—killed Collins." He would have collapsed if Bohannon hadn't supported him while Neely brought a dipper of water.

"I knew they wanted them horses for nothin'," Bohannon said mildly. "Let's get him in the house, Red, and look at that shoulder. Neely, you take the horse."

"Ain't we ridin' after them?" demanded Neely.

"Sure, when we get Riggs fixed up," said Bohannon. "You get our horses ready, Neely, and put Red's saddle on a fresh one." He looked across Riggs' sagging head to Starr. "I reckon you wanta ride with us, Red?"

"You're damn right," Red said quietly. "I'd like to get a look at them horse thieves, Bo."

"Their faces covered," Riggs said. "But I know—some of 'em."

"We know 'em, boy," Bohannon said kindly. "How you feelin', Riggsy?"

"It ain't too bad," Riggs panted. "Went clean through—I think."

"We'll fix you up fine, kid," promised Bohannon. "You lost some blood but you'll be all right. Mary's a good nurse."

Riggs said, "Eight or ten—of 'em. Got Collins quick—the first shots. I was lucky. . . ."

"They got the horses for nothin'," Bohannon said. "But they made one hell of a mistake doin' it. Nobody's big enough to get away with stealin' horses in this country."

"Murder too," Riggs said through clenched teeth. "In the back—they got Collins."

"They'll pay for it, so," said Bohannon.

As soon as Riggs' wound was bathed and dressed they left him in the care of Mary Hale Bohannon and hit the trail after the raiders. On the way out they met two more of Bo's men coming in with the riddled body of young Collins. These two wanted to join the chase but Bo said he was leaving them in charge of the ranch, which was more important.

The bandits were apparently heading for the Upper Calumet country, a wild broken highland area of irregular forested hills and rocky ridges, cut by deep crooked canyons and gulches. The rustled cattle had vanished in that direction, too. It was obviously the same outfit with a hideout somewhere in those hills. The trail of ten riders driving thirty-odd horses was easy enough to follow. After getting away with an entire herd of cattle the outlaws were evidently disdainful of any attempted pursuit.

But this time the whole region was aroused as the news spread over the range. Hard-faced, slit-eyed men from ranches along the way joined the Bohannons and Red Starr by twos and threes and larger groups. Behind them other riders galloped to the Bohannons spread and took up the trail from there. Throughout the day the posse grew until it was a large and purposeful cavalcade of fighting riders.

The Bohannons were well known and liked along the Kiowa, and Collins had been a popular young puncher. Bo had lost first his cattle and now his fine herd of horses, and other ranchers had suffered in lesser degrees. It was time something was done. If they waited on Sheriff Swett they'd lose everything they had. The only way was to get out themselves and run the raiders down to earth.

They camped in the foothills that night, concealing their fires with care, and were up early in the morning to push on in the misty grayness. They came to the place where the tracks of two riders diverged from the main body in a northeasterly direction toward Stockade, and Red Starr thought: Lyle Corsson and Billy Buell. Worried for Roskenny, Red was tempted to branch off after the two gunmen but decided to hang on with the pursuit awhile longer.

It was essential to secure positive identification of some of the outlaws. In a sense this was the best thing that could have happened for Roskenny's cause. The big man didn't know it but he had some allies now, where before he had stood solitary and friendless except for Red Starr.

ON THE third day they discovered where two more men had angled back toward Stockade, and Red figured it was probably Jeeter Drisko and George Gammill, the next in line to Buell and Corsson. The big guns were getting worried about the relentless and overwhelming posse on their heels. They were checking out while they could, leaving the small fry to take the consequences. But the odds were suddenly evened up when a score or so of horsemen joined the raiders' ranks. It became clear now that the quarry was striking straight through the Calumet toward the Pinal Mountains.

"I know the Pinals," Red Starr said that evening at the cookfire. "The way

they're headin' there's only one pass they can take and that's Choctaw Cut. A few of us could ride on ahead and cut 'em off. Once they get into the Cut they could hold an army off as long as their ammunition lasted."

"How many men, Red?" asked Bohannon.

Red considered briefly. "At least four. Not more'n six. I reckon six'd be best."

"You and Neely and me," Bohannon said. "And three volunteers."

There were immediately at least thirty volunteers. Three who had the most right for revenge were finally selected: Bob Collins, older brother of the murdered man; and McAlister and Albritton, ranchers whose stock had been decimated by rustling.

"We'd better shove along some tonight," Red Starr suggested.

The others were agreeable, eager, and the six riders filed out of camp and climbed along a moonlit escarpment toward the high dark ramparts of the Pinals. The main force was told to press on hard in the morning so as to be on hand to close the trap when the forerunners turned the bandits back at Choctaw Cut.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day two columns were converging on the foot of the pass into the mountain wilderness, Red Starr and his companions swinging an arc from the right side in a desperate effort to intercept the larger company of horsemen, which was pointing straight for the Cut. From a scrubby ridge on the flank Red saw that they were going to be too late to take up defensive positions in the pass itself. Already the enemy lead riders were emerging into the wood-rimmed rock-strewn clearing below the mouth of the narrow defile. The only chance was to hit them on the run and smash them back down the slope. There was no way of knowing whether the posse had come up close enough to be effective or not.

From the cover of brush and boulders they scanned the plodding leaders in the opening below, and Red Starr recognized at least three of Harry Humboldt's hired hands: Coke Cuddy, Sam Heeken, and Soapy Symes. He must have guessed correctly about the four who had left the trail, because these three seemed to be in command.

Bob Collins, rifle ready in his impatient hands, jerked the butt to his shoulders, but Red Starr placed a restraining hand on his arm. The range was too long for accuracy.

"Too far, Bob. We got to ride in on 'em. Take it easy until they spot us. Then drive like hell to head 'em off."

They slid cautiously down the side of the ridge and urged their mounts forward as quietly as possible, moving through brush and trees to the shale drifts along the base of the cliff, utilizing all the cover available. If they could get into that open lane without being seen they'd make it in plenty of time. . . . But they couldn't do it. All at once lead whined on the air and screeched off stone surfaces as the rapid explosion of guns broke out from the trail.

RED STARR hurled his horse onward, hanging low in the saddle, and the others leaped after him, plunging and pitching in the lose shale, floundering at last into that open stretch of firm earth and rock while bullets tore the brush and ricocheted from the cliff. Bob Collins and the Bohannons were firing as they rode, and Albritton and McAlister unlimbered their rifles. Red Starr slowed his steed at a natural barricade of boulders and turned his old Henry repeater loose. The others ranged along side of him and hammered shots into the basin below.

Caught in the open, the rustlers were thrown into terrible confusion as the slugs poured into them. Horses reared screaming and fell with thrashing hoofs. Men cursed and fought their bucking mounts, toppled from the saddle and lay still or scrambled frantically for shelter. Some

wheeled and fled for the forest, while others flung themselves down to fight back. Yellow dust and gray powdersmoke wreathed the scene in a dense haze.

Cuddy, Heeken and Symes, well ahead of the rest, spurred their horses in a wild running climb for the mouth of Choctaw Cut. Red Starr emptied the Henry rifle at them but they scrabbled on up the slope. Lifting and driving his bay mare forward Red raced to head them off, sheathing the rifle and drawing his Colt .44. Close behind him thundered the Bohannons and Bob Collins, while Albritton and McAlister wisely hung back to reload their rifles and cover the charge.

Red Starr swung his sixgun up and fired at full gallop, and his second shot sent Coke Cuddy flying from his horse's back to bounce and roll in a swirl of dust among the rocks. If the bullet hadn't killed him the fall certainly did. Red was above the other two now, between them and the pass.

Sam Heeken reined up abruptly and leveled a rifle at Red, but Bohannon's Colt blasted and knocked Heeken over. Soapy Symes was firing furiously with both hands when his horse went down and cartwheeled crazily end over end. Thrown clear and half-stunned Symes was still trying to get his guns up when young Neely rode right over him with trampling steelshod hoofs. Heeken, hard hit but still alive, raised his rifle again from the ground, but Bob Collins hurtled in and shot him to pieces against the smoking earth.

They took cover to reload and survey the situation. McAlister and Albritton were still pumping lead into the chaos of the clearing, but resistance there was dying out as the riddled and routed column made for the woods.

"Come on, let's run 'em down!" yelled Bob Collins, mad with vengeful bloodlust. "Come on, boys, we want every one of them!"

Bohannon lifted his hand. "Wait a minute, Bob."

From below came the ragged swelling roar of a tremendous volley, repeated again and again.

"The boys down there'll take care of 'em," Bohannon drawled.

Neely grinned wildly. "But we better drift down to see that none of 'em crawl away, Dad." Bob Collins seconded this motion with profane conviction, and they descended toward the treetops where the shooting still sounded.

The posse had come up in time all right, the jaws of the trap were closed tight. There were seven dead rustlers at the top of the trail, and there would be a lot more down in the forest.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhack Lead

FIVE days had passed without a sign of Starr, without a word from him. Roskenny was afraid somebody must have bushwacked the little readhead, someone who didn't want him to report on Bohannon's horses. Roskenny was able to get up and move around the room now, but he was too weak yet to go outside. He could eat now and his strength was gradually returning, but it only made him the more fretful at being confined.

He had seen nobody but Dr. Newell, the barber who came to shave him, and fat Sheriff Swett who came to complain about the hardships of office. None of them told Roskenny anything he wanted to hear. Neither Edna Howison nor Harry Humboldt came back to see him. He wondered what the hell they were up to. Something was certainly going on. Someone had seized upon his sickness as an opportunity to put the screws to him. Roskenny's wrath mounted by the minute as he waited.

On the sixth day Roskenny felt good enough to shave himself, bathe and dress

carefully in clean clothes, but the exertion left him spent, shaking and sweating with weakness. He was resting in the large chair by the windows when Edna Howison rapped and entered the room. She seemed a bit upset to see him out of bed and fully dressed. She said Harry had been away, and she'd been so rushed and tired out at the office that she hadn't got around to see him earlier.

"Where's Red Starr?" asked Roskenny, disregarding her apologies.

"Nobody seems to know," Edna said. "Unless he's out with that posse."

"What posse?" he demanded. "Damnation, I don't know a thing that's goin' on. Nobody bothers to tell me anythin'!"

"We didn't want to worry you, Bert," protested Edna. "The story is that some horses were stolen from Bohannon, and all the ranchers are up in arms trailing the bandits into the Upper Calumet. All kinds of crazy rumors are floating around but that is all anybody knows for sure."

Roskenny got up and paced back and forth on trembling legs, pounding his big fist into his broad left palm. "Thanks for telling me," he said with heavy sarcasm.

"Oh, Bert," she cried softly, standing and moving close to him, tipping her blonde head back to gaze up into his rugged face. "Please, Bert." The fragrant nearness of her filled his head and fired his blood.. Roskenny swept her into his great arms and held her tight. Edna lifted her lovely red mouth to meet his.

Light-headed and dizzy Roskenny sank back into his chair, and Edna sat on the arm and held his hand.

"Still weak," he said disgustedly. "But I'll be all right in a day or two. Got to get outa this cell, Edna. There's a lot of things happenin' hereabouts. I wanta get in on them."

"Please don't rush things," she said anxiously. "Be sure you're all well and strong before you start out, Bert."

"I will, Edna," he promised, stroking her firm smooth arm with his free hand.

But after she had gone all the anger and doubt and apprehension flooded back in him. Somebody had rustled those horses he had sent Corsson and Buell to buy from Bohannon. That tied it all up neatly and securely in his mind. The poor damned fools had decided to steal them instead of paying for them. They were just stupid enough to pull something like that. Perhaps they'd been behind all these rustling activities, and the freight losses as well. He wondered what Harry Humboldt would think when he found out. Harry thought he could control those gunmen but he couldn't do it. As soon as Roskenny was out of the way they went hog wild.

Something was going to bust wide open in Stockade before very long. Roskenny's teeth were set and his gray eyes lighted coldly. He had to be on his feet when it did, he had to be fit and ready. . . . He

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sickened suddenly as he realized that Bohannon and the other cattlemen would blame him and Humboldt for the whole vile business.

Maybe Harry knew it and was running away before it broke. But Roskenny didn't think so. Harry Humboldt was a slick character; there were lots of things about him Roskenny didn't like, but he had never seen Harry run away from any kind of trouble.

THE next morning Doc Newell brought news, although he couldn't vouch for its authenticity. The posse was said to have caught and wiped out the whole band of outlaws at the foot of the Pinals. The identity of some of the culprits was going to shock Stockade to its foundations and startle the entire countryside. The posse was on its way home now to break the story and the backs of the men who were behind the rustlers.

Roskenny inquired if Humboldt was in town, and the doctor nodded. "He's somewhere around."

"I've got to see Harry," he said. "Tell him it's very important, Doc."

The doctor agreed to and departed. Roskenny waited with waning patience all day long, but Humboldt did not show up at all.

Roskenny was considerably stronger and he knew that he had to move before it was too late. He had dressed that morning and walked the room at intervals through the day to bring his leg muscles back to life, swinging and exercising his arms at the same time.

In the evening he pulled on his boots, knotted a scarf about his neck, strapped on his gun-belt, and slipped into a short-waisted buckskin jacket. When he was all ready Roskenny stepped to the door and paused for a moment with his hand on the knob. Then, taking a quick deep breath like a man about to plunge into icy water, he opened the door and tugged his hat into place and went out into the fresh air.

* * *

Red Starr and Neely Bohannon had left the posse and ridden on ahead toward Stockade. Red had been anxious to push along because he was afraid Roskenny might be in danger. Neely, impatient at the slow pace of the cavalcade with its wounded and prisoners and recaptured horses, had requested to go with him and Red was glad of the long lanky boy's company.

It had been a bloody and bitter business back there at the bottom of Choctaw Cut, a terrible slaughter. It would have been even worse if some of the hot-headed cowmen had been given their way. They didn't want to take any prisoners; they wanted to either shoot them down or string them up. But Bohannon, Red Starr, and most of the others said there had been enough killing. Let the Law take care of those who surrendered.

There had been twenty-eight rustlers when the shooting started. Only eleven were still alive, and six of them were wounded. Seventeen outlaws had died in that battle, while the cattlemen, with all the advantages of surprise and numbers, had lost three dead and had five wounded.

The prisoners talked readily enough when they saw the branding-irons being heated in the campfires. Their bosses, Corsson and Buell, had turned back to Stockade, followed later by their lieutenants, Drisko and Gammill. The three remaining leaders had been slain up there near the mouth of the pass. About the higher-ups the men didn't seem to know much, but several of them were willing to swear that Roskenny had nothing to do with it. . . . Buttoned into his shirt pocket Red Starr had a signed statement that would clear Roskenny and place the guilt where it belonged.

Perhaps those men who died in the woods deserved only what they got, but

Red Star still didn't like it. Neither did Bohannon, McAlister, Albritton, and many of the rest. Only the youngsters like Bob Collins and Neely were exultant, and even with them it was brief. They soon sobered and saddened as the enormity of the massacre dawned on them with a blighting effect. The return trip was a solemn affair, a long drawn-out funeral procession in the wilderness.

Red and Neely were relieved to get away from it and let their horses out on the way toward the Kiowa River.

"I aim to get drunk when we hit town," Neely said in a dull flat voice.

"You're pretty young for that, kid," Red Starr told him.

"I got to have somethin' to burn the taste outa my mouth, Red."

"I know what you mean, Neely. But it don't ever do any good."

"It does for awhile."

"Then it comes back worse'n ever when you wake up."

"I'm still aimin' to do it," Neely said.

"Sure, listen to me preach," said Red. "I'll prob'ly get drunker'n you do."

After a silent space Neely said, "The first part a that fight was all right. The last part was what got me, Red. It was like slaughterin beef in a corral. You ever do much killin', Red?"

"More'n I like to think about, Neely."

"It ain't much fun, is it?" asked the boy slowly.

Red Starr swore softly. "If we had a sheriff things like that wouldn't happen."

"Maybe it wouldn't a happened if Roskenny hadn't been down sick," Neely said. "Maybe I been wrong about Roskenny. If you and Dad like him he can't be too bad."

"He's a hard man and he got hungry for power," said Red. "But he'd never steal and he'd never murder. There's good in him but he keeps it hid underneath. Bein' sick might've gentled Ross, if all this trouble hadn't come up."

AS THEY neared the Horseshoe Bend it was night, and the moon at full soared large and round and golden above the western mountain pinnacles. Once more Red had the feeling that unseen eyes were on him and the boy, and an ominous sense of danger filled him with creeping chills. An old familiar prickle quivered up his spine and tightened his scalp.

"You notice anythin'?" Red eased the Henry rifle out of its boot.

"I got a funny cold feelin'," Neely murmured, lifting his own rifle.

"There's men who'd rather we didn't get to see Roskenny," said Red calmly. "Be ready, boy."

But nothing happened when they splashed across the ford in the Kiowa and loped on toward Stockade, and still the moonlit night seemed rife with menace and lurking enemies.

They were within sight of the town lights when lead hummed overhead and rifles cracked behind them. Ducking low and spreading apart they flattened their horses out into a fast run. Peering back over his shoulder Red Starr saw the spurt of muzzle flashes, pale in the moonlight, and close behind him silvery showers of sand raked up by the bullets. Twisting in the saddle Red squeezed off a couple of shots to discourage pursuit and Neely did likewise.

"We better circle round," yelled Red. "They might be waitin' for us in there."

They left the road and swung across the rolling prairie to enter town by a back route. The snipers behind them were too far away to be very dangerous, but Red knew there was apt to be more serious opposition ahead. Threading their way through back lots and yards with eyes alert and rifles ready the two riders made for a dark cluttered alley that led into the flickering yellow lamplight of the main street.

They were in the alley now, the horses picking their way daintily through the debris. Neely Bohannon said, "I can taste

that first drink already, Red." Red Starr smiled and said, "Me too, son." Red thought: Well, we made it. All the way in I expected to get jumped. We had too much horse for them sharpshooters back there. . . . He patted the mare's neck. . . . We'll see Roskenny now. If the big fellah's feeling up to it we'll get after the ones who are really to blame for all this lawbreaking. The top hands that led them poor hombres out to rustle and kill, and left them up in the hills to be shot and slaughtered.

They were about halfway to the street when the bay mare reared suddenly high in the air, and guns exploded blindingly from the end of the alley. Red Starr felt the horse shudder as she took the impact of the slugs that were meant for him. The bay screamed once, pawed the darkness, and was falling backward when Red kicked out of the stirrups and threw himself clear. As he landed on his feet Red whipped out the sixgun and cut loose at those muzzle-blasts. The mare threshed, rolled and was still, and Red dropped to the shelter of her body as lead droned and screeched off the adobe walls.

Neely's horse was bucking wildly but the boy had his Colt out and blazing away. Red heard the bullets strike and hoped it was the horse, but it was Neely pitching headlong from the saddle. His mount whirled and stampeded out of that roaring inferno. Stonedust sprayed over Red's head and gravel pelted him as he hauled the boy in behind the barrier of horseflesh.

"You—drink—that drink—for me," panted Neely.

"You'll be all right, kid," Red Starr said.

NEELY shook his head slowly and held a dark-glistening hand to his shattered chest. Blood welled from his mouth as he tried to speak again. His head drooped and light glinted golden on his sun-bleached hair. His lanky frame stretched taut, then went limp and loose and lifeless. Neely Bohannon was dead at eighteen. . . . A great anger and hate flared up in Red Starr, but his hands were deft and sure as he reloaded his gun and Neely's. They were both .44's.

Something moved against the lights at the mouth of the alley and Red fired swiftly. As the reports faded he heard a man gasping and coughing. The bulky form of George Gammill reeled out into the open on grotesque jerking legs. Red triggered again and Gammill collapsed heavily into a shapeless heap. One of them down.

Red's keen ears detected the sound of receding footsteps in the street. The other rat was running. Red stood up quickly, stepped over the dead mare, and stalked toward the end of the alley with the guns balanced and ready in either hand. He was oblivious to any danger to himself now. He just wanted to get that other man under his guns. He walked straight out into Main Street.

A terrific hammerblow smashed his right arm numb and useless. Even as he spun against the adobe Red Starr brought his left-hand Colt to bear on the tall figure behind that spearing flash of orange fire and saw the snarling coyote face of Jeeter Drisko. Red's left hand burst into flame as he opened up with Neely's .44, holding it hard and steady, driving the slugs home.

Jeeter Drisko danced crazily backwards on disjointed legs as the bullets battered him, bounced off a post at the corner of a store porch, jogged spraddle-kneed across the slat sidewalks and sprawled face-down over the hitch-rack.

Red Starr moved away from the wall, right arm hanging broken at his side. The pain was just beginning to eat through the numbness. Red stared at Drisko draped over the hitch-rail, then at Gammill huddled on the duckboards. He looked up and down the street. Men were pouring out of saloons and running toward him from all directions. He watched them nar-

rowly, expecting to see Lyle Corsson and Billy Buell coming at him with their guns, but he could not find them in the hurrying throng.

"Somebody give me a hand with the kid," Red said, turning wearily back into the smoke-filled alley. "Neely Bohannon."

"Go get Doc Newell," a voice commanded.

Someone else laughed and gestured. "Them two don't need no doctor."

"No, but Red does."

"He got both of 'em!" another murmured in awed tones.

"Sure. Didn't you know the Redhead was hellfire when he got started?"

"The kid's dead, too. Somebody oughta ride out and tell Bohannon."

"Bo'll be in here like a wild man. Stockade's goin' to see some more killin' before this is done."

CHAPTER FIVE

Clean Sweep

WHEN Roskenny left the Stock House he walked out toward Harry Humboldt's home on the outskirts. He had to see Harry and prepare him for what was coming. They were both in a very bad spot. Fortunately Swett was still sheriff and they could handle him. But those ranchers would really be after their hides. . . . Roskenny kept to a moderate pace, breathing deeply and savoring the taste of open air again, taking pleasure in the full moon that rose majestically above the western crests.

He found Harry's house unlighted and deserted-looking on the edge of town, no sign of life about it. Maybe Humboldt had fled, after all. Roskenny retraced his way thoughtfully. He would go to see Edna Howison. Thank God he had her to trust and rely on. If Harry had run away Edna would see that he took no more than his rightful share of the funds. Lamplight glowed soft and golden in the windows of the snug cottage Edna Howison lived in. That had been Roskenny's gift to her, compensation for his failure to marry the girl. Well, he was more than ready to marry her now. Illness had taught him that no man, however strong, could stand entirely alone and independent, free and self-sufficient. Roskenny was tired of playing a lone hand, weary of being a lone wolf. He had ridden the single trail long enough, yes, far too long. A man needed a family, wife and children, a boy like Bohannon's Neely to grow up tall and fine and straight, to stand and fight beside him.

Roskenny was advancing on the cottage door when the shadows of two figures on the interior caught his eye. Pausing he glanced in through the nearest window and froze instantly rigid at what he saw there. Edna and Harry Humboldt, their arms about one another, their faces lighted with a look that could mean but one thing. A strange and horrible fascination held him there, stricken and helpless, his stomach revolting and his blood turned to ice-water. Little by little he ceased being incredulous at what his eyes plainly beheld.

Then he knew what he should have suspected long before. What he would have known if he hadn't been blinded by ego and over-confidence, so supremely sure of himself and his power over men and women. He saw the whole thing now and knew that he was all alone in the world, without a single friend or ally. He had thought Edna his devoted slave, content to serve and wait for him forever. He had pictured Humboldt and his gunmen as too afraid of him to attempt anything underhanded. He had been wrong all the way, utterly wrong. Roskenny groaned aloud in misery.

He was so entranced he heard nothing behind him until the blow swished wickedly at the back of his head. Dodging and rolling his head with quick instinct Roskenny's hat was knocked off as the gun-

barrel jarred from the side of his skull to his shoulder. Whirling around, half-dazed, he saw that there were two men as he reached for his Colt. The second and bigger one slugged Roskenny squarely in the face, snapping his neck and sending him teetering back on his heels. Apparently they meant to beat him up instead of shooting him. As a usual thing Roskenny always welcomed a good rough-house battle, but now he was weak from sickness and confinement.

SPITTING out a mouthful of blood Roskenny lunged back at the large broad man and struck with all his strength, feeling his knuckles cut into flesh and bone as the solid impact rippled up his forearm. The other's hat flew off as his head rocked sharply back, and in a shaft of light Roskenny saw the broken-nosed buck-toothed ugliness of Lyle Corsson. He had always wanted to bash those teeth down Corsson's throat, and he went in swinging.

But Corsson brought one up from somewhere that nearly tore Roskenny's head off his shoulders, and the ground seemed to rise swiftly and slam him on the back of the neck and shoulder-blades. Roskenny's boots thumped down as his great body settled to earth. He tried to rise but there was nothing left in his arms and legs. He spat blood and sobbed out at his completely helpless state.

"Get up!" snarled Lyle Corsson, kicking at Roskenny's legs. Billy Buell, standing aside with the gun still in his hand, laughed lightly.

Roskenny tried again and got up as far as a sitting posture but couldn't move from there. Corsson stepped in over him and unleashed a tremendous punch from way back, smashing it full into Roskenny's face. Roskenny's head jerked violently and the back of his skull thudded on the hard-baked dirt. Rocketing lights burst behind his eyeballs and merciful darkness closed in as consciousness left him.

Lyle Corsson had his boot lifted to stamp into Roskenny's bloody face when the door opened and Harry Humboldt's voice lashed out into the night: "No, you damn fool, *no!* Haven't you made enough mistakes yet? Who is it?"

Corsson's teeth protruded in a ghastly grin. "Roskenny," he said proudly. "The big chief himself. He was peekin' in the window, Harry."

Humboldt stepped outside and shut the door after him. "We've still got a chance then. It's a wonder too, after that stupid play you made at Bohannon's. Take him to the jail and have Swett lock him up. Tell the sheriff Roskenny ordered all that rustling done, and spread the word around that Roskenny was responsible and is in the jailhouse. Get the people worked up about it. They'll take Roskenny out and hang him before those ranchers get into town."

"Say, Harry, that's pretty smart," Corsson said admiringly.

"Tell Swett I'll be over to see him myself," Humboldt went on. "Get a move on, boys. And after Roskenny's locked up you'd better check with Drisko and Gammill and help them cover the roads into town. We want Roskenny swinging on a rope before any cattlemen come in. It's our only chance to get out of this mess."

"We better pass the word before we join Jeeter and George," Buell put in.

"That's right, Billy," said Humboldt. "Get everybody steamed up for a lynching."

Corsson and Buell were delivering the unconscious Roskenny to Sheriff Swett when the shooting broke out down the street.

Swett groaned as if in mortal agony. "What the hell's happenin' now?" he whined. "I'm tellin' you this job ain't what it's cracked up to be. Anybody that wants this star can have it for all a me."

"Without that badge you'd starve," Buell said contemptuously.

Corsson bared his buck teeth. "String along with us, Swett, and you'll be wearin' that star until they plant you in Boothill."

The gunfire went on and the fat sheriff shivered and shook with every blasting report. With a scornful smile Billy Buell took the keys from Swett's palsied hand and locked the cell door on Roskenny, a bloody senseless hulk on the wooden bunk.

After giving the sheriff his instructions Buell and Corsson went out to see what the shooting was about and to promote a hanging.

WITH three men lying dead in Stockade and news of twenty-one others killed outside it wasn't difficult to rouse the bloodlust of the mob to the fever heat of insanity against the man said to be responsible for this bloodshed and death.

By the time Red Starr's arm was dressed, set in splints, and suspended in a sling, the thing had gone so far that Red could not divert it. He tried to get to Sheriff Swett with his signed statement from the raiders, but the sheriff refused to see him. Red showed the paper to countless citizens. Most of them wouldn't bother to read it; those that did scoffed at it. Red talked his head off but to no avail. The people of Stockade had become a mob inflamed with a single purpose: to hang Roskenny by the neck until dead.

In the cool misty grayness of early morning the street was jammed solid-full with hoarse, angry, gesticulating humanity, surging to and fro before the jail-house. Within the walls a thin line of haggard-faced deputies stood clutching rifles and gaping fearfully at the unruly horde outside. Behind them Sheriff Swett was hunched dismally over his desk, head in hands, perspiration beading his bulbous features. From time to time Swett spoke to the taut backs of his deputies, and the words were always the same:

"Lemme know if you see any riders comin' in. Watch for 'em, boys. We gotta let him out the back way the minute you see anybody ridin' into town."

The crowd was getting impatient and ugly. Rocks shattered the jail-house windows and crashed against the adobe walls, shots were fired into the air, and the savage roaring sound from human throats was like that of wild beasts in a frenzy of rage.

"They mean business," muttered a deputy. "They ain't goin' to hold off much longer."

"They're like critters gone crazy," said another. "It gives me an awful feelin' to see people actin' thataway."

A third sentry poked his thumb back over his shoulder toward the cells at the rear: "How d'yuh figure *he* feels about it?"

Roskenny was slouched on the boards of his bunk, wide shoulders against the wall. His nose ached and felt enormously swollen, his bruised eyes throbbed, and his mouth was mashed, puffed painfully. He was too shocked and numb to feel much of anything but physical discomfort. He was sick and tired of the whole rotten business.

Roskenny stood up and walked to the front of the cage, grasping the iron bars and shouting: "Swett! Gimme a gun and turn me loose. I'll fight the whole howlin' pack of 'em!"

"Shut up!" the sheriff rasped back at him. "I got enough troubles."

"Hell's hinges!" yelled Roskenny. "They'll be tearin' this rat-trap down over your ears."

"They won't hurt nobody but you, Roskenny!" mocked Swett.

"Yeah?" Roskenny said. "You're twice as scared as I am, you fat grease-pot!" Realizing the inanity of this Roskenny went back and sat down on the rude bed. This was a fine way to have it end all right. But then, it hadn't been much of a life anyway. Awhile back he thought it had been, but he'd been wrong. Hellfire, he'd

been wrong about everything all his days. . . . He didn't like the idea of hanging though. He wanted a gun in his hand and a chance to go down fighting. If he could throw down on Humboldt, Corsson and Buell, he'd be willing to die. . . .

"They're comin' in!" cried a guard. "See them riders over by the Stock House!"

Swett heaved himself ponderously up from the chair and waddled along the corridor to the cell blocks. Revolver in left hand the sheriff unlocked the door with his right. "All right, Roskenny. Get outa there!"

Roskenny stood up leisurely and smiled at the fat man. "Humboldt's orders?" he said. "Maybe I don't wanta leave this nice jail."

Swett shifted the gun to his right hand. "You either go or get a bellyful a lead right here, mister."

"Give me a gun," Roskenny said. "You know they're waitin' out back. Give me a chance, Swett. You know that I'm innocent."

"Get goin'," advised the sheriff, motioning to the rear door.

Roskenny strolled in that direction. "I'll be shot down out there."

"Better than bein' torn apart and strung up by a mob a maniacs," growled Swett. "Travel, Roskenny. Get on through that door."

Roskenny looked at him with cold gray eyes. "If I live through this I'll be seein' you, Swett."

"You won't," Swett said, compressing his flabby lips. "Outside now."

ROSKENNY smiled thinly and stepped out into the fresh morning air, hearing the door slammed and locked behind him. He walked across the back yard expecting a bullet at any second. The sparse sunburnt grass still sparkled with dew that dampened his dusty boots. The early air was sweet and clean. Roskenny inhaled it and thought life might be good after all. Now that his time had come he didn't want to die. There was a lot to live for yet. He had many things to make up to a large number of people.

Roskenny reached the corner of the first building behind the jail and hesitated. Sensing a near presence he spun and saw the slim figure of Red Starr emerge from the shaded shed at the rear of the house. Red's right arm was bandaged and in a sling. He held a Colt .44 in his left hand, and another was sheathed on his left thigh. He handed the first gun to Roskenny.

"They're waitin', Ros." Red gestured to the back street. "Corsson and Buell."

"Figured they would be," Roskenny said. "I feel better with this gun, Red."

"Neely's," said Red simply. "They got the kid last night."

"Oh," Roskenny said tonelessly, his battered face bleak and harsh, his gray eyes shining cold as steel. He hefted Neely's Colt in his big right hand. "I want these two, Red."

Starr nodded his red head. "I'll cover your back, Ros."

Roskenny turned and strode deliberately toward the street, with Red trailing about ten feet behind him. Roskenny stepped out into the street, eyes sweeping the length

— TO OUR READERS —

We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!

and breadth of it. There was nobody in sight. He walked along in the cool blue shadows, and Red kept pace behind him, yellow eyes flickering everywhere. Roskenny lengthened his stride. Red Starr hung back a bit and slid to the side where cottonwoods stood in a small scrawny clump.

"Over here, big man." It was Billy Buell's mocking voice on the left side. Roskenny swung that way but Buell remained under cover.

Lyle Corsson sidled around a corner on the right side of the street, training his weapon with care, too much care. Roskenny swiveled smoothly on him and Neely's .44 blazed and bucked twice in Roskenny's great hand, beating Corsson back against the wooden frame of the house. Corsson lay there on the wall, shoulders hunched, buck-toothed mouth gaping in shocked disbelief. Then his knees jacked out and his massive hulk slipped slackly to the ground.

Billy Buell came crouching out of the opposite alley and his gun roared once before Red Starr fired a left-handed shot that spun Buell halfway around. Roskenny whipped around in midstreet and threw another swift slug into the stocky gunman driving him three staggered steps toward the alley. Buell's back was to them and he seemed to shrivel up.

In a final convulsive effort Buell wheeled about in an erratic turn, but the gun in his hand had become too heavy to lift. He smiled foolishly, shook his head, and dropped flat on his face in the dust.

"There's one more, Red," Roskenny said. "The big one."

"I don't know where he is, Ross," said Red Starr.

They walked down the street side by side now, the gray eyes and the amber eyes watchful and alert, searching intently. Behind them the roar of the mob rose into the pale blue sky. The sun came up and sent long level shafts of red-gold into the streets of Stockade. The two men glanced briefly at the flaming glory of the sunrise and strode steadily on, guns in hand, eyes roving sharply.

"STARR'S with him," Harry Humboldt said suddenly, cradling his rifle at the window overlooking the back street. "They got both those damned idiots. It's a good thing I didn't leave it all to Buell and Corsson." He knelt down to aim across the windowsill at Roskenny and Red in the street below.

Behind him Edna Howison shuddered deeply and drew a long-barreled revolver from the gunbelt that was draped over a chair. "No, Harry," she said. "I can't let you do it. Put that rifle down and turn around."

Humboldt peered back over his shoulder and found himself staring straight into the muzzle of the Colt that looked enormous in Edna's slim hand. His green eyes narrowed. Her hand was firm and unwavering, her face drawn into a white frozen mask.

"Are you going crazy?" he demanded, startled and angry.

"No, I'm just getting smart." Her voice was dull and lifeless. "Put it down, Harry."

"What is this, Edna?" he pleaded. "For the love of God, what—"

"I've been rotten all my life," Edna Howison said. "I'm going to do one decent thing before I die. I'm going to kill you, Harry. For making me what I am. And to save Roskenny and Red."

Humboldt saw that she meant it. Perhaps she was a little insane but she meant what she said, she was going to do it. "All right, Edna," he said, pulling the rifle barrel in and lowering it toward the floor. "All right." Instead of dropping it Humboldt twisted and threw himself flat, turning the rifle on the woman. But the big gun in Edna's hand exploded with a tremendous booming concussion that all but

ripped the glossy auburn head from Humboldt's twitching body.

Edna turned away and was suddenly and violently sick. She had intended to kill herself but she could not do it. The heavy gun fell from her nerveless fingers. She stumbled out of the hideous room and down the stairs. Sobbing hysterically she flew out into the street and collapsed into Roskenny's arms.

"I killed him!" Edna cried. "Harry Humboldt. I don't care. . . . I'm glad! They can hang me if they want to! I don't care. . . ."

Roughly and clumsily Roskenny tried to comfort her.

Red Starr said: "They won't hang you. They'll likely give you a medal."

"I guess that winds it up, Red," said Roskenny.

"I reckon," drawled Red Star. "It's a clean sweep."

* * *

Bohannon was haranguing the crowd in front of the jailhouse, holding them off by the sheer earnest force of his feelings, his presence and will. Tall and thin he towered fearlessly above them, his faded blue eyes flashing, his lean red face grim and lined, his voice a whiplash.

"I tell you Roskenny is innocent," he said. "I'd stake my life on it. My boy Neely gave up his life to help the big fellah. The man you want is Harry Humboldt. He is the ring-leader. Corsson and Buell were his lieutenants. Drisko, Gammill, Cuddy, Heeken and the rest worked under them. I know this for a fact.

"You people know me, you know the kind of man I am and what I stand for. Would I lie to you to save an outlaw with my son lyin' dead this mornin'? I reckon I'm about talked out, but I wanta say this. *If you want to hang Roskenny you've got to kill me first!"*

Sheriff Swett raised his voice in another bleat: "He ain't in there no more, folks. I been tryin' to tell you he broke out." Nobody paid the least attention to him.

The men in the street muttered and shuffled uncertainly. Bohannon was well-known, liked and respected, his word carried a great deal of weight and authority. But the mob wanted action. The hot-heads set up another cry and the crowd surged forward again.

Bohannon drew two sixguns and held them poised before him. "All right, come on!" he challenged. "Who wants to die first here?"

The front ranks broke into a brief ragged retreat with those in the rear trying to shove them ahead. Bohannon stood like a tall weathered rock with the guns steady in his hands. Then a shout of amazement went up as Roskenny and Red Starr came into view with Edna Howison between them.

Red raised a freckled hand for silence. "This lady wants to tell you all the straight story, boys. If you'll listen nice and polite."

Edna told her story, and the crowd listened, relaxing and believing as she went on, frank and simple and straightforward.

Roskenny stood behind her with Bohannon and Red Starr on either side of him. Roskenny was not alone any more. It was a wonderful feeling to have friends.

"I reckon that does what I couldn't do, Ros," said Bohannon. "You're in the clear, big fellah. But I sure got a powerful thirst from all that talkin'. Let's drift along to the Nugget before the stampede starts."

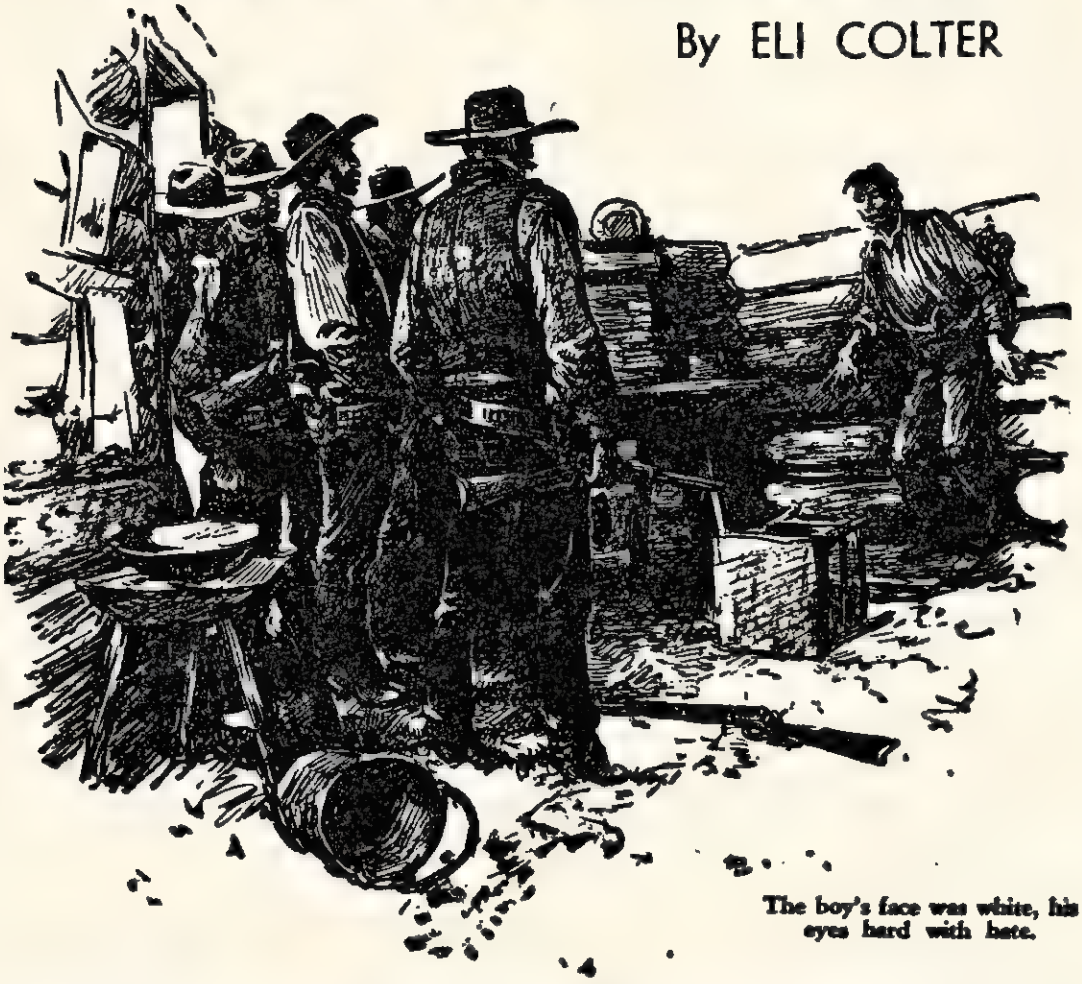
Roskenny nodded with a warm happy feeling aglow inside him. It was something to have friends like Bohannon and Red Starr. And Edna had come through in the showdown, too.

"A good idea, Bo," said Red, smiling a little sadly as he thought of Neely. It was time he got around to taking that drink for the kid.

THE END

THE KILLER AND THE KID

By ELI COLTER



The boy's face was white, his eyes hard with hate.

Black Hawke took the murdered desert rat's whelp into his cut-throat gang and taught the youngster everything he knew . . . except how to handle a Colt, and how to forget. . . .

THE air was still, hot and oppressive, and it seemed to make the six rifle reports blast louder, linger longer. Along the rim of the bench, in a rough half circle, little puffs of smoke showed in six different spots. The walls of the cabin in the clearing thudded where the six bullets struck.

Ten men, deployed in a line along the crescent-shaped bench, stood waiting in silence. They were men who lived outside the law. They were men with the experience of the back trails behind them, who had learned the dubious wisdom of the outlaw. They were Black Hawke, the leader, and his nine followers.

Hawke, whose black hair and swarthy skin had earned him his nickname, was near the center of the curving bench, with four of his men close, two of them on either side of him.

No return fire from the cabin answered the volley, and Hawke grunted in satisfaction. The silence on the clearing below meant just one thing.

Hawke said, "The old fool's done for. Or he's run out of slugs. Either way, we can close in. I never expected the old goat to stick it out this long. Stubborn as hell!"

Hawke was proud of his name. He liked to think it typified him and his qualities. He liked to think that he was keen-eyed, shrewd of brain and wily of tactics as a bird of prey. He looked sharply at Wart Manning, who stood at his right elbow.

Wart tugged at a hair growing from the dark protuberance on his chin, and agreed hastily. "Sure has been stubborn all right, Black. How much has he got, d'you know?"

Both of them were big men, hulking, burly, as powerful as they were ruthless. The other three men nearby drew closer, listening.

Hawke said. "Nobody knows, exactly. I heard he struck a pocket, pretty big one, cleaned it and stashed the stuff right there in the cabin. Around ten to fifteen thousand dollars worth, I guess."

Wart Manning said nothing. He was thinking of the man down there in the cabin, Alan Bristol. Bristol had been all kinds of a fool. He should have known that the wild hills of Idaho were no place to bring a family; but he'd brought them there, over a year ago, gold crazy and ignorant of what raw gold even looked like. Showed how dumb the fellow was, Wart thought, choosing his spot and building his cabin almost within shouting distance of Black Hawke's favorite hangout from the law.

The poor nitwit hadn't even heard of Black Hawke; which was too bad for him. The rigors of the climate had killed off his delicate wife, but the stubborn Bristol had stayed on.

Wart's attention was aroused by Hawke, who nudged him and gestured toward the clearing below. Evidently, Hawke had guessed correctly, Bristol had run out of ammunition and had no defense left.

The prospector appeared suddenly in the doorway of his cabin, and held high a stick perhaps three feet long. On the end of the stick fluttered a white rag.

Hawke laughed, swung up his rifle, and shot Bristol through the head. He laughed again as Bristol staggered out of the doorway, turned half around and fell.

Hawke whistled a low signal, and his other men came hurriedly through the brush to join him at the center of the bunch.

Wart Manning said, "'S all over."

Hawke said, "We'll go down and pick up the cache and beat it."

They went down the face of the slope, all ten of them, Hawke in the lead, careless now of showing themselves and of making noise. They reached the clearing, swerved toward the cabin, and none of them except Hawke even glanced at the body of Bristol lying a few feet from the cabin wall. Hawke slowed an instant to whip out his sixgun and put another bullet through Bristol's head, just to be sure. It was well known of Black Hawke that he never took chances.

He lunged on into the cabin, eagerly, his men close behind him. Three steps inside the doorway Hawke came to an abrupt stop. His men ganged behind him in a tight group staring in amazement.

ALMOST in the exact middle of the cabin, backed against the farther wall, stood a slender boy. He might have been fourteen years old, if he was small for

his age. His face was white with fright, his eyes dilated, but he stood erect and glared at Hawke.

Hawke said sharply, "Where the hell did you come from?"

The boy's voice was clear, defiant. "I've been here all the time."

Wart Manning said, "Hell! I remember now. I heard that Bristol had a kid. But I thought he died when the old lady did."

The boy said, "I was sick. For a long time. I got over it. Almost."

Manning said to Hawke, "Better get rid of him, fast."

Hawke made no answer. He was still staring intently at the boy. Every man has his vulnerable spot. In Black Hawke, it was an innate admiration for courage. The boy was so badly terrorized that he spoke stiffly, but he stood there glaring back at Hawke with a hard anger in his wide eyes. He didn't shiver and beg for mercy.

Hawke said slowly, "No. I reckon not. He's got guts. I'll take him in hand and train him. This gang needs new blood." He said to the boy, "How old are you, bub?"

The boy said curtly, "It's none of your damned business. And my name ain't bub."

"What *is* your name, then?"

"That's some more of my business."

Hawke said, "Take him in charge, Wart."

The boy made no attempt at resistance, as Manning moved up to him and seized him roughly by the arm, but there was scorn in his eyes as he looked at Wart. Wart said gruffly, "Take it easy, kid. Obey orders, and you won't get hurt."

The boy said nothing. He stood motionless, and watched with that same burning scorn in his eyes while the men ransacked the cabin from end to end. They dug up every square foot of the dirt floor with Bristol's pick and shovel. They were sweating and disgruntled when they finished the job, but they had found no cache.

Hawke turned on the boy, held there by the wall in Manning's grasp. "You know what we're lookin' for. Where is it? My patience don't last too long. It won't do you no good to lie and say you don't know. We'll find ways of makin' you talk."

The boy said contemptuously, "Why didn't you ask me in the first place? I could have told you. There ain't no cache."

Hawke blinked. "What? You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care whether you believe it or not. There ain't no cache."

"What'd he do with the gold out of that pocket?"

The boy said. "He never found any pocket. He never found nothin'. He had about two hundred dollar's worth of dust in a tomato can out in the mule shed. It's still there. That's all there is; there ain't no more."

Black Hawke, who prided himself on being able to spot a lie on any man's tongue, felt instantly certain that the boy was telling the flat truth. He said angrily, "How come it got around that your old man had struck it rich?"

A thin smile crawled over the boy's face, but did not lighten the contempt in his eyes. The eyes were not so wide now; they had begun to narrow in a dawning calculation. "Simple. Anybody ever asked him how he was making it, he just kept his mouth shut. He was ashamed he'd never found nothing. They took it the other way round."

Hawks spat in disgust. "No use hangin' around here then. Some of you boys go bring up the horses. Wart, you hang onto the kid. Might's well hightail it back to camp."

Still the boy said nothing in protest, made no attempt to get away, but watched

them all with the same burning contempt and growing calculation.

As they started out of the cabin, the boy stooped suddenly at a moment when none of them was watching him, and snatched a small object from the floor, thrusting it into his trousers pocket. Then he followed them out into the clearing.

His gaze clung to Black Hawke, and now there was added to the contempt and calculation a third thing—a hard and implacable hatred.

He spoke to none of them all the way back to their camp.

THEY rode for two hours, taking a leisurely zigzag course up the steep slopes of the mountain, before they reached the gang's hideout. As the men dismounted and began to unsaddle their horses, the boy curiously scrutinized the group of rough slab leantos built around a central large log cabin. At one end of the cabin a rusty stovepipe stuck up into the air, and a plume of smoke filtered upward from it.

Hawke turned his horse over to Wart Manning, swung about and shouted toward the open cabin door. "Judd! Hey, Judd! Grub ready?"

A man appeared immediately in the doorway. The boy's gaze centered on him, and held.

The man was enough to make anyone look a second time, in amazement for an instant, then in pity. He was gaunt and stooped and crippled. He weighed perhaps a hundred and ten pounds. His face was a network of scars; scars that ridged his forehead and cheeks, that showed livid through a ratty beard. His gray eyes were dull, sunken in wrinkles. His left leg dragged, an inch or two shorter than the right. His clothes were dirty tattered rags.

He said, "You got back quick." His voice was toneless, the voice of a man out of whom all spirit had been beaten. "Come on in. Grub's waitin'."

Just as he started to turn back into the cabin, he caught sight of the small slender boy staring at him from just beyond Hawke. Something flared suddenly in his dulled eyes. It might have been protest, it might have been rebellion, but certainly it was tinged with blazing anger and pity, the look was abruptly repressed, gone almost as quickly as it had come. He disappeared beyond the cabin door.

When the men entered the building, herding the boy among them, the man Judd was stolidly limping from the long plank table to the large cast iron stove and back again, setting out large bowls of stew and beans, plates of cold sliced meat and fresh hot biscuits.

The boy ate, steadily, silently, watching covertly the man limping between stove and table at the outlaws' continual demands. Every man of the band showed toward him less consideration than would have been given to a cur dog with the mange, but the lame man ignored their contempt and their curses alike, and several times he shot a fleeting glance at the boy.

When the meal was over, Hawke assigned the boy to a bunk in the slab lean-to in which Wart Manning slept. And still the boy seemed to have no thought of trying to escape. He removed his shoes and socks and lay down on the bunk and slept.

FOR three days the outlaws lay about the camp, eating and drinking and dozing. The boy—keeping to himself, obeying any order given, saying little—kept a veiled watch on the lame man Judd.

The fourth day the entire band was awake early, saddling their horses and getting ready to ride. Hawke said to the boy, "We're goin' to be away for a few hours on business, bub. Take it easy, and stay smart. Don't try to get away."

THE BOY made no answer. He stood looking after them as they rode out of sight. When the last rider had disappeared among the trees, the boy went swiftly into the big cabin.

Judd was standing by the large cast-iron stove, stirring a bubbling stew of beef and potatoes and onions. He went on stirring, saying nothing, but his dull gray eyes fixed on the boy, watching, waiting.

The boy said, "My name's George. George Bristol. What's your name besides Judd?"

"Judd's my last name. My first name's Harry. You can call me Harry, when nobody else is around."

The boy said, "You can call me George when nobody else is around. I'm fourteen. Small for my age, Pa always said."

Judd stopped stirring, and stood as erect as he could, both hands hanging at his sides. "Pleased to meet you. How old would you guess I am, George?"

George kept his open gaze on Judd's scarred face. "About fifty. You could be older than that."

Judd said bitterly, "I'll be twenty-seven my next birthday. Eight years ago this gang took me in. I was out with four other men on a mining trip. Hawke and his cut-throats massacred the other four. They brought me to camp with 'em, to train me to be one of the gang. I wouldn't train. I tried to run away. They caught me a half mile from camp. You see what they did to me." He pointed to the scars on his face, his humped back, his dragging leg.

The boy said, "You ain't had a chance since?"

"Never. They don't allow me a horse or a gun. They make me do all the work around camp. Don't you ever try to get away, George."

George said, "No?" He smiled, for the first time since the outlaw band had found him in the cabin, a thin smile, hard and without humor. "No, I won't *try*. I'll wait till I can be sure. When I go, I'll take you with me. Before I go—I've got a debt to pay."

Judd frowned, puzzled. "A debt? Who to? I don't get it."

The boy said, "No. I'd just as soon you wouldn't. I know. That's enough. Pa learned me, a long time ago, to always pay my debts. Another thing Pa learned me—a man's poor if he ain't got a friend. Maybe you and me could be friends."

Harry Judd eyed the boy curiously, in a long level look. Some of his hidden youth was reborn for an instant in his gray eyes. "I ain't had a friend in a long time. But don't let Hawke catch on, willya?"

The boy laughed shortly. "Pa learned me not to be a fool, too, Harry."

Hawke began to be increasingly puzzled about the boy. The latest

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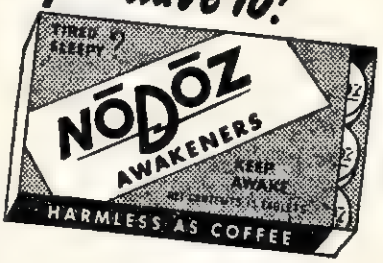

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raid had been successful, though it hadn't netted them a great deal, and the outlaws stayed close around camp for a while, waiting for the grapevine to bring them news of another probable haul. The boy seemed to fit into the life of the camp as if he belonged there. He seldom showed any emotion, and then it was evident only in a fleeting look of black hatred that blazed for a mere instant in his eyes. Two years passed. The boy showed no change at all.

Black Hawke began to worry about it. He tried to talk to the boy, and got only monosyllables in reply. He could see no indication that the boy had any concealed feeling toward Harry Judd; George treated Judd openly with the same scorn he held for the rest of them. Hawke decided that the sooner he began to train the boy, the better off they all would be. Let the youngster see just where he stood; stop him from getting any unwise ideas in his head. He might be stubborn, like his old man. The time to start training him out of it was now.

He gave George a horse and a gun, and set himself the task of personally teaching the boy to shoot. He put targets—bits of paper, tin cans, scraps of bark or old broken china, and instructed George carefully in the handling of a sixgun.

George didn't do well. He exhibited an uncontrolled fear even in the holding of the weapon. When Hawke forced him to try to shoot it, he couldn't send a bullet within feet of the target. The rest of the gang thought it was funny; they watched the show, and roared with laugher, and kidded Hawke about his budding gunman.

Hawke ignored their jibes, or snapped at them to shut up, and kept doggedly at trying to teach the boy to use a revolver. But within six months he grudgingly had to admit that the boy would never be able to hit the broad side of a barn.

Hawke swore in exasperation. He said to Manning, "Well, damn it, he's got to be able to do something to earn his board and keep. He couldn't hit a lighthouse in a fog with a sixgun, and he's scared to death of a horse. We'll just have to keep him moving till he gets over it. Next time we go out for a haul, he goes along."

Wart Manning said, "Damn him! He's more bother'n he's worth. Whyn't you just plug him, and forget it?"

Hawke shook his head. That night he took the boy into his own leanto, and told him bluntly that the gang was in need of more funds and supplies, and he was going to help get them.

"We got wind of a couple of miners comin' into town with their pokes. Trouble is, there's a bigger haul over to the east, at a smelter. The gang's got to split. The other boys'll take the smelter. Me'n you'll take the prospectors. You ain't no good with a gun, but you can bluff, can't you? You won't have to shoot. I'll keep 'em covered while you grab the dust. You needn't be afraid. I'll see you don't get hurt."

The boy laughed. It was an odd sound. It sent a chill crawling down Hawke's back. The boy said, "What ever gave you the idea I'd be afraid?"

THE next morning the gang was up early again. They ate a hurried breakfast, and the rest of the men rode away to the north. Hawke took the boy with him and rode to the west. Just before they left, George made an excuse to dart into the big cabin.

Judd was clearing the dirty dishes from the long plank table.

George said, "Don't be afraid. I'll come back."

Judd's dull eyes went over him. "I've been afraid since the day you came. But—I'll try."

The boy went back outside. He got onto his horse warily, while Hawke watched with a frown. At his side, the

boy wore the holster and gun with which Hawke had commanded that he run his bluff. They rode down the trail away from the camp, the boy in the lead, Hawke close behind.

They were perhaps a mile from the camp, when the boy turned in the saddle, swiftly, lithely, leaning in the way of a man who is an accomplished horseman and knows that his horse knows. The heavy Colt seemed to leap in his hand, not awkwardly, but with a smoothness that told its own story at a glance.

The boy said harshly, "Put 'em up, Hawke. Quick. I always hit what I really aim at."

Hawke stared, then he laughed. He hadn't been looking when the boy turned. He hadn't been looking when the gun leaped to the boy's hand. His laugh was genuinely amused. The boy couldn't hit the side of a stone wall. But he'd have to teach him a lesson. The laugh died. Hawke reached for his own weapon.

The Colt in the boy's hand blasted, just as Hawke's finger crimped the trigger.

Hawke's bullet whined within a foot of the boy's head. The outlaw toppled from his saddle, a look of sheer amazement on his face. It was still there when he died, before the running boy could reach him.

George bent over him, watching, to be certain the man was dead. He couldn't lift the heavy body. He tied his lariat around Hawke's chest and let the outlaw's own horse drag him out of sight into the brush. He tethered the horse there within a few feet of the body.

Then he got back onto his own horse, and rode at a fast run up the trail. He had listened closely to Hawke's instructions when the leader was telling Wart Manning where to go and what to do. He knew exactly where to find the rest of the band. The trail rose steeper and steeper, but the boy urged the horse mercilessly on. The animal was lathered when he finally brought the boy within sight of the smelter. George relaxed in the sad-

He sent the horse down the slope. . . .

dle, and drew a long breath of relief, then sent the horse down the slope at a gallop.

A man came out of the smelter and watched him approach, looked up with concerned inquiry when George brought the horse to a staggering halt.

"What the hell's the matter, boy? You need help?"

George said, "No. I came to warn you. Black Hawke's gang is coming to rob you. If you ain't got enough men, you better get help."

The man said quickly, "How many in the gang?"

"Nine."

"We can take 'em, bein' warned. There's seven of us. We'll mow 'em down to the last man. Thanks!" The man turned and ran back into the smelter.

THREE and a half hours later, a haggard-faced boy rode a lathered and weary horse into the small mining town at the foot of the mountains. Behind him he led another horse, on which a dead man was draped face down. Of the first men he met in the street, he asked directions to the deputy sheriff's office.

The deputy sheriff looked up with an inquiring smile as the boy came walking in. "Well, young man! Anything I can do for you?"

He noted the dust on the boy's clothes, on his face and hands. He saw the sunken eyes in the boy's thin white face.

The boy said, "Yeah. Come outside."

The deputy rose, his smile turning into a puzzled frown, and followed out to the sidewalk. The frown grew at sight of the dead man on the second horse.

The boy said, "Look at that man, and tell me if you know who he is."

The deputy stepped close and peered at the hanging head. "Holy cow! That's Black Hawke! Where the hell did you find him?"

"I didn't find him. I killed him. And I can tell you where you'll find what's left of the rest of the gang. You know where the Lead-boy smelter is?"

"I sure as hell do."

"The rest of the gang went to raid it. I rid in and warned 'em. I reckon you won't find nothin' but corpses. If any of 'em's alive, they'll be still tied up."

The deputy interrupted sharply. "How the hell you know so much about the Black Hawke gang?"

The boy told him. "Three years ago they took me prisoner." He told him all of it. "All that time I been playing 'em along, waiting my chance. My chance come. I took it." He stared at Hawke's body. "For near two years, he tried to teach me to shoot. I didn't learn. I already knew how. How old you think I am?"

The deputy scowled, staring at him. "Oh, fourteen, maybe."

"I'm seventeen. You think I'm old enough to know what I'm talkin' about?"

The deputy said, "I think so, young man. Sorry I spoke out of turn. I guess you just look so young because you're peaked."

The boy ignored that. "Then you won't be holding me because I've been with the Black Hawke gang for three years."

"N-no, of course not. I reckon I sometimes know the truth when I hear it. This is one of the times. Maybe you was with the gang; you wan't one of 'em."

The boy said, "No." As he turned to ride away, he muttered to himself, "I got to go get Harry."

IT WAS two days before he again came to the bandit camp. Most of that time he had lain hidden in the brush, eating nothing, drinking creek water and waiting, waiting for the horse to rest. When he did come into the camp, he found it empty. Harry Judd was gone.

For the first time since the Hawke men had taken him, the boy showed real emo-

tion. He went frantic. He raced from end to end of the camp, calling, shouting Judd's name. There was no answer. He searched the big cabin, the rough slab leanto where Harry had slept. The camp was just as the men had left it.

The boy stood in the doorway of the big cabin, sweat on his face, terror in his eyes. What had happened? Had the men at the smelter failed to get the best of the gang? Had the Hawke men robbed the smelter, come back here, found Hawke absent and gone away, taking Harry with them?

He forced himself into calmer thinking, and went over the camp again. And he found then the sign he would have seen in the first place had not his terror over Harry blinded his eyes. He found horse droppings that were only a few hours old. Some of the gang had come back. For some reason they had not stayed. Something had warned them, and they had fled.

How many of them? There was no guessing. All the horses were gone. Why hadn't they taken their effects? They must be intending to come back. He remembered Wart Manning's saying, long ago, when Hawke had complained that the boy would never learn to shoot, that the best thing to do was plug him.

Manning might feel that way about Harry, if Manning was still alive. The boy went into Harry's leanto in the dusk, and lay down and slept till dawn. He ate a spare breakfast from the foods in the big cabin. Then he started riding circle around the camp, in an ever widening radius, trying to cut the fugitives' trail.

He found it, finally, leading due east. Nine horses are bound to leave something of a trail. He wondered whether all of the outlaws were alive, and the men at the smelter slain. He rode for seven days before he finally caught up with the fleeing men, and when he got them in sight, found that there were four of them, leading the other five horses. On one of the five horses Harry Judd sat, bound into the saddle. The man in the lead was Wart Manning.

The boy stalked them patiently, till they halted to make camp, late in the afternoon. Manning snapped a curt order, and the men slid out of their saddles to the ground.

From the cover of the brush, the boy called sharply. "Put up your hands. You're covered."

Wart Manning whirled, and glared angrily in the direction from which the voice had come. "Who the hell are you?"

The boy said, "Up with your hands."

Manning scowled, and spoke to one of the other men. "Damned if it don't sound like the kid. Let him have it!"

The four men fired a volley into the brush. Two of the bullets struck the tree behind which the boy crouched.

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He peered around the tree, leveled his Colt and pulled the trigger. The spinning lead caught Manning between the eyes. He plunged to the ground. The boy fired again. The man beyond Manning's body fell.

The boy shouted, "Do you give up?"

One of the other two cursed, and darted behind his horse. The fourth man ducked behind a small boulder. There was no tree quite close enough.

The boy slid from behind his shelter. He moved on until he had a clear line on the man behind the horse. He shouted again. "Got you covered. Give up?"

The man started, but the only answer he made was to shoot. The bullet came so close that George heard its whine. He shot the man through the head.

The fourth man came up from behind his rock, hands reaching high, yelling in panic, "Don't shoot! I give up!"

ALL this time Harry Judd had crouched in the saddle, watching, his scarred face blank and unreadable. He had recognized the voice. He knew who had shouted. He couldn't believe the kid was doing the shooting. He wondered who was back there in the brush and trees with the boy.

The boy's voice called to him. "Harry. Ride over this way while I keep him covered."

Judd picked up the reins with his bound hands. He had little leeway, since his wrists were bound to the saddle horn. But he managed to get hold of the reins and tug on them. He nudged the animal with his knees and rode into the trees.

The boy shouted, "You, there, by the rock. Don't try to run for it."

Judd's horse came blundering through the brush, and the man by the rock suddenly flopped to the ground and tried to roll to further shelter.

The Colt in the boy's hand crashed, and the rolling figure jolted and lay still.

Judd rode into sight staring at the smoking gun in the boy's hand. "*You*—doin' that shooting?"

The boy said, "Yes." He holstered the gun and reached up and started removing Judd's bonds. "What happened?"

Judd said, "The men at the smelter was ready for 'em. Killed the other five. Scared 'em out. They cut and run."

"Why'd they leave camp?"

"Hawke didn't come back. Old agreement. I guess you didn't know. Anytime he was gone for two days, somethin' was wrong. They was to hit for the other hideout, higher in the mountains."

The boy pulled free the last rope and threw it aside. "The deputy sheriff's got him. Dead. I killed him. Pa always said I was a shooting fool."

Judd slid off the horse to the ground, stumbled and steadied himself against the horse's side, and stood upright, staring at the boy.

"What we goin' to do now, George? I'm no good for anything. You can't have me hangin' round your neck."

The boy's somber face lit in a slow smile. "There's plenty you can do, besides cook. You'll see, after we get back to the old home farm in Wyoming. Don't you remember *nothing*, Harry, except about the gang half-killing you when you tried to get away?"

The dulled eyes strained to recall, eager to oblige. "N-no, I'm scared not." Then he brightened. "I know I'm twenty-seven. I'll be twenty-eight come January." He scowled. "Hell, no. I was twenty-seven when you come. I'm thirty now!"

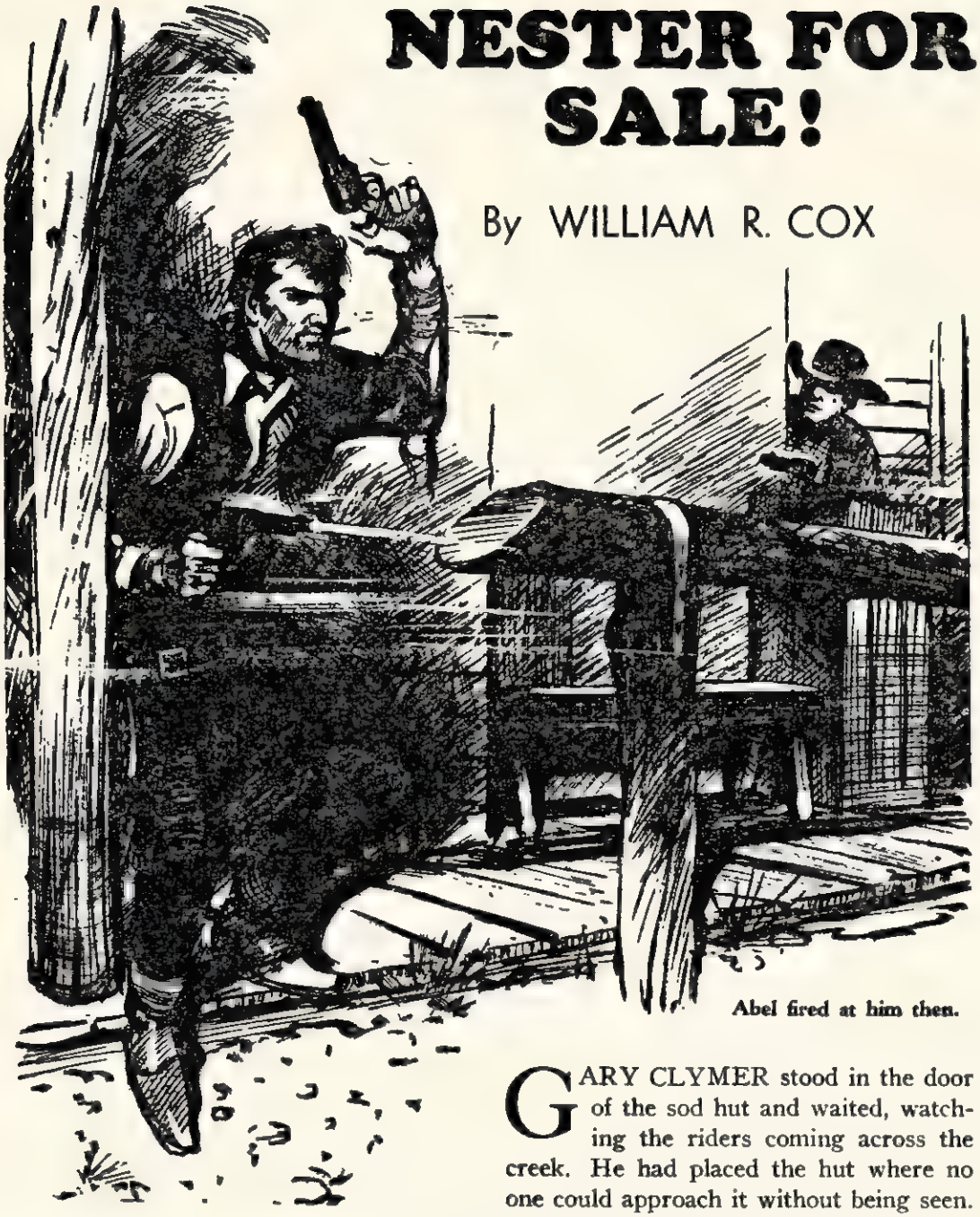
George said, "You don't remember the note you wrote, and managed to get mailed, only a few years after the gang first got you?"

"Note. Me?" The dull eyes strained again. "Why, yeah! I did write. To Pa. Beggin' him to do something to get me away from 'em. But—but he didn't an-

(Continued on page 128)

NESTER FOR SALE!

By WILLIAM R. COX



Abel fired at him then.

Gary Clymer had this last bitter choice: He could sell his guns and soul to Abel Snow, and get the dead man's girl . . . or he could turn away from the only woman he'd ever loved and walk, stiff-necked and unafraid, toward the waiting gallows!

GARY CLYMER stood in the door of the sod hut and waited, watching the riders coming across the creek. He had placed the hut where no one could approach it without being seen. He looked at the shiny new hoe, the grubber, the rake, all unused except by the Mexicans who had built the hut and scratched the surface of the soil and then hastily departed before Jacob Granite could ascertain their identity. Clymer chuckled, remembering how they had skedaddled.

He was a lean man, ugly, tanned, with

deep-set brown eyes and a long jaw-line. He wore levis and a blue shirt and soft riding boots. His horse was a roan, race-track built, and the saddle on the corral fence was ornate with hand carving. Two revolvers hung low on Clymer's thighs and his hands nestled in a belt studded with .45 cartridges.

The riders came pounding. There were five of them. The Hawk Ranch was riding to battle. Jacob Granite, as always, rode in front. Astride a black stallion he was a formidable picture; a stout man, young, open-faced and unafraid; an intelligent man, withal, who had built Hawk with his own wits and brawn.

Clymer studied the riders without emotion, with the calculating stare of a gambler or a killer. The smaller man with the reckless, tough face was Besom, Hawk Ranch foreman—a dangerous fellow, a man whose temper was touchy, a good man with cattle but unthinking in a fight. The others, Lanky, Beans and Morgan were cowboys—just plain workmen with guns at their belts.

Granite yanked on the reins and the black ploughed a furrow in the yard. The Hawk men fanned out and sat, staring hard glances at the sod hut, at Clymer. In the doorway Clymer lounged without motion, without expression.

Granite said, "So this is it, huh? Nestin'. On my land."

Clymer said, "Howdy, men. Light and smoke?"

"You're no farmer, Clymer," said Granite. He was not a man to temporize, as Clymer knew. "You're a damned gun. You're a Texas killer. I know your kind. You're here to cause trouble . . . Why?" He flung the last word like a pistol shot.

Clymer said, "I'm takin' up a section. This is government range, Granite. I'm within my rights."

"This is Hawk range," snapped Granite. He had blue eyes, very bright, and a firm mouth. "You start here and ten others'll move in. I'll be cut off from the creek. I've got two thousand head. . . ."

Clymer said, "You cryin' on my shoulder, Granite?"

"You won't farm. You ain't got any idea of farmin'. Why are you here, Clymer? What's behind this?"

The big man was smart. He held his temper, he asked questions. He made no threats, offered no violence, although they were five against one.

Clymer said, "I aim to make a stake. I admire this country. Been here two months and I think it's got a future."

Besom flared out, then. "You got as much future as a tissue paper cat in hell, you Texan saddle-bum. You'll last a week and then they'll be sendin' for your folks, if any."

Clymer said mildly, "He talkin' for you, Granite?"

The big man did not turn his head but his voice was sharp, "I'll handle this, Besom. . . . No, Clymer. I don't threaten. I act. You'll have to get off. I can't have nesters in here. I wish I knew your game. I wish I knew the why and wherefores of this. But I know you won't spill it." He shook his head regretfully. "You been a good man, Clymer. I liked you. Now I dunno. There's no reason in this."

Clymer said, "A man's got a right to file on government ground. If I work my section I get title. That's all. And now, gents, how about gettin' the hell outa my yard?"

He straightened his long frame and the guns seemed to settle nearer his hands. Lanky twitched in the saddle—he was very young and he had seen Clymer shoot, in town. Besom's face went turkey red. The others tensed and waited.

Granite's blue eyes raked up and down the lean figure of the gunslinger. Then he shrugged broad shoulders, wheeled the black and spurred away. He was a magni-

ficent horseman, Clymer noted, as he always noted details about men of action. The five rode through the ford and away over the rise in the ground toward Hawk Ranch.

Clymer stood watching the emptiness of the horizon. He was content to be alone, he was a man often solitary. . . .

A LONE horseman came cautiously from the east, from Cattown. Clymer remained motionless. The man came in, glanced at the marks of the five horses in the yard. "They been here, I see."

"Yeah," said Clymer.

The man chuckled. He was another big man. He was dark, with a strong, hooked nose and deep-etched lines around his mouth. He was thirty-five years old and looked forty. His name was Abel Snow and he owned G-Dog, the ranch adjoining Hawk, a spread half the size of Granite's, a prosperous ranch, but hemmed by the town line and Hawk's far-flung acres.

"You sure are hell," grinned Snow. "Run 'em off, huh?" His speech was soft, like Clymer's, betraying his Texas origin.

"Sorta . . . Granite is no fool."

"He don't know you and me . . . he don't know about us?" The dark eyes were suddenly fierce. "If this slips—"

Clymer said, "He don't know. But he will. If yore nesters don't come in here quick, he'll find out. The man's smart. He don't make big talk. He asks questions."

"If it gets out. . . ." Snow shook his head. "It can't. We ain't been seen together. I can ride out here, play like I'm tryin' to move you out, same as Granite. . . ."

Clymer said, "You always been thataway, haven't you, Abel? Since we was boys. You plan the fights—I handle 'em."

"You could allus whup me," chuckled Snow, his good humor returning as he reassured himself. "But I allus outthunk you."

"Yeah," said Clymer. "Smart, that's you. Got yourself a nice lil spread now. But never satisfied. You always want more."

"It's not that." The mercurial Snow darkened again. "You know it ain't that."

"Not money, nor land, no." Clymer sighed. "Worse. You want the man's gal. You wanta knock him down, mebbe have me shoot him, so you can get the gal."

"It ain't for you to talk about it," said Snow harshly. "You come here to do a job. You never was particular afore. I've allus paid you well. You could have your own spread—'cept you think you can fill inside straights or buck a crooked faro layout. Or you get some chippy you go sky-hootin' to hell an' gone."

Clymer nodded. "Sure. That's right."

"And never mind about Linda," Snow said. "You 'tend to this business here. If you show you can stand off Granite alone, there'll be nesters out here in a month. Plenty of 'em. I'm ready to side 'em in a war agin Hawk. People will say I'm on the side of the little feller. And in a war—he might get killed. You never missed yet. . . ."

"I know all that," said Clymer patiently. "You better run along, Abel. You better go back and scheme some more."

"I got a bill in the legislature now that will make a county out of this country. You'll sure be sheriff. I'll be big when I beat Granite and have the people on my side. They don't like his high-handed ways nohow. He's a bully and Besom's worse."

Clymer said, "Granite's a cattleman, old style. People never liked 'em . . . but they're part of the country, like cactus. Go 'long, Abel. I got to till my soil."

The gay mood swung back and Abel Snow howled with laughter at the thought of Gary Clymer bending his back to farm work. "You'll be the death o' me yet with

yore jokes," he cried. He climbed his buckskin cayuse and rode away, still chortling. He rode a sorry nag and he never was a horseman, Clymer thought, unconsciously comparing his partner with Jacob Granite. . . .

CATTOWN was a one-street cow village, with the customary string of frame-building stores and a saloon known as The Cat Tail. There was a story about a fabulous tomcat which had given the town its name, and even now there were more felines in the streets than in any town Gary Clymer had ever seen. In the saloon it was cool and quiet and he lounged, sipping his first drink of the afternoon.

He did not take a second. He hitched his guns into place and walked out and down the boards, past the general store, the smithy, the dry goods emporium. There was a small shop and in it a girl toiled over a piece of material, fashioning pleats. He stood a moment in the gathering shadows, watching her.

Up the street Farmer, Spike and Lacey were splitting up, watching Clymer. The three were real toughies, men brought in by Abel Snow for one purpose—to shoot when Abel gave the signal. The lean man did not glance at them.

The sod house was gone, destroyed. Hawk had come down on it when he was not present. The new tools, already rusting from disuse, had been broken and piled in a little, neat heap . . . a nice Besom touch, Clymer thought. The corral fence was leveled and the rails piled as though for future use, when Clymer was gone.

And no nesters had come to the Hawk range.

The challenge had been given. Clymer had been notified that his stay in the country was up. Three weeks, they had given him, before striking. Granite had never threatened, never called upon him again. When the time came, Granite had known what to do.

Well, tomorrow Granite would be in town, with his outfit. Everyone knew it, and everyone knew Clymer would be there. But everyone did not know about Farmer and Spike and Lacey . . . nor that Jacob Granite was as good as dead and buried.

Because, Clymer thought methodically, they did not know about Clymer, either. No one in this country really knew. Down along the Rio Grande and in Mexico and up in Montana people knew. They had seen him in action. But here he was not known.

The girl suddenly looked up, as though a signal had been given. She was a tall girl, finely made, with long hands and fingers, a quick-moving girl in a close-fitting bodice and a long, full skirt. Her eyes were hazel, slanted, her brows delicately arched. All of her was graceful, cool; yet underneath was a fire which Clymer recognized.

He knew about women. He was an ugly man who had tremendous physical attraction for them. Some strange chord in him responded to their moods, and in a country hell on woman and dogs he could call a hundred ladies his friends. It was something which often puzzled him but which he accepted with gratitude.

She moved now, this girl desired by two strong and clever men, two men of means and promise. She moved to the back of the shop, leaving the work rumpled across a small table. A door closed.

Clymer sauntered through a narrow alley. He came to the rear of the building and she was waiting, framed in the portal. He stepped within and she closed the door and said, "What's happening, Gary? I hear rumors, I feel the stillness of the town, as though a storm was coming. What is it? I know you're in it . . . and Jacob is in it."

Clymer said, "Jacob tore down my hut."

"Oh!" She knew what that meant. She was western all the way through.

"He had to," Clymer said carefully. "It was a thing he had to do."

"Why did you go out there? Why, Gary? It's so unlike you, so foreign to everything about you. Why?"

He shook his head. "I went. And he cleaned me."

She put her hand on his sleeve. She had never touched him before. They had spoken without introduction, right at the start. They had met often, at night, in sunshine on the open range, making sure no one saw them together. Yet they had never spoken of love or anything like it. The peculiar bond between them had gone unexplained, unexplored, as though each feared to test its strength by probing.

GRANITE wanted to marry her. She had never answered yes or no to the big owner of Hawk Ranch, but everyone knew Granite wanted her, church, bell and candle. Abel Snow wanted her. He would take her on any terms, but he was willing to marry her. Not everyone knew that, for Abel was devious in love as in everything else.

Clymer felt the trembling of her hand. He said, "So it's got to be me or Granite. That's the way it's got to be." He watched her closely in the half-light. He had to know certain things.

She tightened her grasp. She said, "Why? You came here and deliberately went up against him. Why?"

Clymer said, "Linda, these things happen."

"Granite, Besom, Lanky, Beans, Morgan . . . you're going against the Hawk outfit? Alone?"

He said evasively, "I aim to take care of myself, Linda."

"Oh, you've been a gunman," she said. Her hand still held his forearm in a vise-like grip, but her tone was normal. "You've killed men. I can see that in you. But I thought you'd quit. I thought you'd settled down, with some crazy scheme of making a homestead. I knew you were no farmer, but I thought maybe you'd run cattle on your land . . ."

Not on a section, thought Clymer. You didn't think that . . . He said, "It don't make no never mind why or what—'ceptin' I got to meet Jacob Granite tomorrow. I had to know what you felt about it."

"I don't want you to do it. I want you to ride out of town. I want you to go back to Texas. Gary, you're dynamite to me and you know it and I know it. But I don't play with dynamite." Her lovely features twisted for a moment, then she went on steadily, "I've been around, Gary. I guess you know. I was orphaned at sixteen. Indians. I went around, singing and dancing for awhile. . . . I could always sew, and I got smart and came here. I can have a good life, Gary, if I keep my head. Jacob Granite's a fine man beneath his bluster. . . ."

Gary said softly, "What about Abel Snow?"

She laughed a little. "Don't you really know? A sly man, untrustworthy, conniving. I've seen jackleg gamblers like him. No, Jacob is my man. That's why I want you to ride out, Gary."

He looked at her, his long face still as death. He had never met a woman who stirred him so deeply. He was, for once, slightly confused. But only slightly, he told himself, exercising the cold discipline which had kept him alive through so many dangerous years. Too many years, he added to himself. . . .

"So it's going to be Jacob."

"If you don't kill him," she said. Her hand slid up his arm, around his shoulder. She was close, not pressing against him, but standing straight, close to him. She said, "I'll be honest. If you kill him and

you make me, I'll go with you, probably. I see the thing between us. I recognize it. I don't dare want it, Gary. I've been kicked around before and once more would end me. I'd die. But if you kill him in a fair fight and you make me, I'll do it."

For a moment he stood there and the odor of her hair in his nostrils shook him to the core. Then he put his right hand on her and gently pushed her back. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes. I reckon I knew that. It'll be okay, Linda. It'll be okay."

She said, "I can't do anything about it, Gary. I'm like that. If I marry Jacob, I'll be all right. I can make myself stick, once I'm into it. Hawk is a fine place . . . Jacob wants children, a solid home. He's a good man, all the way through, hard but good. They don't know about me and they never will. You know about me, and that's the rub, Clymer. Underneath we are a great deal alike."

"Yeah," said Gary. "Reckon you're right, Linda. All the way. It'll be okay."

He stepped past her to the door. She did not try to stop him; she did not ask what he would do. The assurance in his voice was enough for her. From now on she would trust him to do what was best for her.

IT WAS dusk and the stars were faint. They seemed far away. Later they would come down close and he could reach them. But now they were no help . . . no help to a man and his dreams.

That was the trouble with the solitude. It bred dreams. Man lives in his dreams, Clymer knew too well. Frothy stuff; no good now. Tomorrow Hawk would be in Cattown. . . .

He met Abel Snow in the rear of the livery stable. Abel was grinning from ear to ear. He chortled, "Talk about luck. How about Landy and Spike and Lacey showin' up just now?"

Clymer said, "Some luck. 'Specially when they was in Taos, El Paso an' Butte only a month ago!"

"Jest came together and rode in. Happened on 'em in the saloon. . . ."

Clymer said, "Now, Abel . . . remember me? Yore dumb cousin from Texas ain't that dumb."

Snow said, "If you think. . . ."

"I know," said Clymer calmly. "I know that you got to thinkin' I might miss Granite and Besom would get me and you'd be no better off. I know that when the nesters didn't go out to Hawk, you were left with on'y one peg to hang a kill on . . . me! So you had to play safe. You sent for them boys. How you're gonna explain them after the showdown, I can't fathom. But you no doubt got some cute scheme for that, too."

Snow said, "Now, Gary, don't go off half-cocked. Them boys rode in and I seen a chance to get you sided. After all, you couldn't of got the whole Hawk outfit by your lone self. You oughta be glad I hired them boys."

"So you did hire them," said Clymer. He took a deep breath. He said, "Okay, Abel. You hired them. Now you start the fight, and let them finish it. You go ahead. Your so damn smart, you figger that out. Because, Abel, my cousin, I'm quittin'."

The crafty face hardened. Abel Snow said, "You can't quit, Gary. You know you can't. I still got that evidence, Gary. You quit me and you'll hang, down in Texas."

"I'll probably hang or be shot anyhow," Clymer pointed out. "And I ain't ridin' Texas way. You go ahead and kill Granite, however you figger it, or pay them boys to do it. I'm ridin' out, see? And you can turn your evidence on that old thing over to the Federal Marshal and then he can look for me . . . if I don't come back and look you up, Abel? You ever think of that, old son?"

"You can't do it. . . ."

Clymer was suddenly impatient. He turned and walked away. He went into the hotel and took a hot bath in a tin tub. He dressed in his best clothing and went down to the Cat Tail Bar and drank whiskey, but not too much whiskey, and lost twenty dollars in a stud game. Farmer, Spike and Lacey were around, but they did not address him. They were three hardcases, all right, as hard as they came. . . .

He went back to the hotel and slept through the night.

IT WAS just breaking daylight when Gary Clymer awakened. He rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Time to get out the cayuse and ride, he thought. Time to get out before the fireworks started.

Lanky, Beans, Morgan . . . and Besom. Jacob Granite, a big man, a thinking man, unafraid. Expecting Gary Clymer, the killer, to brace them on the streets of Cattown, knowing Clymer would surely kill one or more of them. They knew about Clymer's kind. How did they feel this morning?

Farmer, Spike, Lacey . . . he knew how they felt. Brackish taste in the mouth, heads dull with liquor. Take a few hours for them to get back their razor sharpness. They did not feel anything except that another job was pending. Those boys were hardened to killing.

He did not spend much thought on Linda Corum. It hurt too much to think about her. She was the only truly honest woman he had ever known. He was a man who did not look for much honesty in women. Her directness and truthfulness had taken him unaware and had completely defeated him.

Well, he could ride north. There was a marshal's job waiting in that new mining town. A hundred a month and found, the letter had said.

He went over to the wash basin and poured water. The soap stung his eyes. He wiped vigorously and packed his duffel. He wore a plain blue shirt and striped trousers and a rebosa for riding. He adjusted his Stetson and stared at himself in the wavery mirror; an ugly, lean man with the past lying in the depths of his eyes. A man too worn with life to change, now.

He went downstairs and the cook was stirring, so he sat down in the empty dining room to have breakfast. He ate the pancakes and eggs and fried ham and drank two cups of coffee with biscuits and honey. The town was quiet, but beginning to stir. It was a homely little place and he had begun to like it very much.

That was always the way. Just about the time he got used to a place he found occasion to move on. Sometimes he wanted to, sometimes it was because he had to go. That time Abel Snow knew about, down in Texas, was one of the

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times he had to pull stakes. Abel had remained, and collected. He was dead certain that after he had shot Post and Drayton, Abel had slipped in and robbed the bank. It had to be that way because afterwards Abel had always been pretty well fixed. Clymer had ridden out, because Post and Drayton were important men in that town and there was a lynching mob ready to get the killer of their banker and mayor.

Yet Drayton and Post had been evil men. They had deserved their violent end. They had attempted to kill Abel Snow because he had out-crooked them in a crooked deal—and Clymer had stepped in.

He shrugged, paying his check. There was no use looking for justice, he knew. Justice was a word. The law was one thing, justice another. There was little enough law in the country, and gun-rule often contained just as much justice as a court.

He started out towards the stable in the rear. He picked up his pack and went into the back hall. He was across the yard when he was conscious that his steps had slowed. He shook his head angrily and went on.

He dropped the pack in a corner. There was an upturned keg and he sat upon it, rolling a cigarette in hands grown suddenly nervous, and the thoughts rolled unbidden in his careful mind.

Jacob Granite was not getting justice.

Abel would have no difficulty in scheming up a quarrel. Farmer and Spike and Lacey could force an issue without cause. Jacob Granite, expecting trouble with Clymer, would be faced with this new force, caught unaware and slaughtered. Abel might not even appear in it, now that the three gunslingers were close at hand.

A wave of resentment against Abel swept over Clymer. Never satisfied, that was Abel.

THE sun was coming through a cloud, a red ball of smoldering fire. It would be a hot day. Clymer thought of himself, nesting on the Hawk range, deliberately seeking trouble with Granite, coming into town and meeting Granite's girl in secret. He did not like the picture of himself. He did not think of himself in the terms which would be applied to anyone acting as he had acted.

Again he thought of the long trail, of putting time and space between himself and this place. It was the only sensible thing to do, now that he had split with Abel.

He saw the cloud of dust on the road from the west and knew it was Granite and his men. They were not seasoned fighters, they could not wait it out. Even Besom, the tough one, had been unable to bear the waiting. They were coming in early, to have it over with. They would be like clay pigeons to a man with Snow's experience.

He paused at the corner of the hotel corral. His glance went swiftly up and down Cat Street.

He saw Abel Snow, then. The big man was down near the general store. He was making motions, giving signals.

Abel had somehow got his men up early. And then Clymer suddenly knew. He knew, because Abel made a frantic motion, pointing to the western road. Farmer, a hulking man with no brow and a prognathous jaw, stepped from the smithy and stared at the patch dust made by the Hawk outfit.

They had not come out for Granite this morning. Abel had routed them early for another reason. Spike, the thin man with the wall eye, would be across the street. Lacey, small and hard-bitten and tough would be some place else. Abel was slinking in the alley next to the general store to make sure everything went right.

In order to take the northerly trail, Clymer would have had to ride east, then

make a swing. It was a well-laid ambush. Abel was taking no chances that Clymer would come back for him. Abel meant to kill him in the street and lay the blame on Hawk.

They all were out of sight now, waiting for Hawk. Clymer could imagine the suspense in Abel's breast. If the timing were right, if Clymer rode out at the right moment, Abel's plan would work better than he had ever dreamed. Hawk would be right in town when Clymer fell, and Abel could then open fire on Granite, claiming to be avenging murder. . . .

The riders from the west loomed larger. They were coming right into the trap, pretty as a framed picture. In a few moments Abel would be drooling with joy at his success.

Clymer debated, tense in his spot of present safety. He dared not ride out and warn Granite. He would be disbelieved if not shot down on sight. Granite's men would be trigger-nervous this morning.

If he let them ride in, they were done for.

If he stepped into it, he was between two fires.

He almost chuckled at the toughness of the jam. He had been in tights before, plenty of them, but never in one like this. If there was a way out of this, it was to fork his bronc and ride south, make a swing, and under cover of the gunfire, cut the trail northward.

He shrugged the guns snug on his hips. He had tied them down this morning with buckskin thongs. He took a last look at the sun, which was changing color now, turning golden. The air was fresh and a bird sang in the tree behind the hotel. Clymer whistled between his teeth, an old song about a girl named Louisa. . . .

HE COULD move very quickly in his soft boots. There was one alley he knew about. Every inch of it had felt his tread. He went back of the hotel and through littered back lots. He avoided the cans and bottles and trash, staying close to the buildings. He came to the rear of the building where Linda had her shop and where she lived in two little rooms.

He eased into the alley. The smithy was across the way. There was Farmer. Spike was on Clymer's right somewhere. Abel was over beyond Spike, on the other side of Cat Street.

The whereabouts of Lacey was what worried him most. Now that he was in it he did not worry very much, but he did want to know about the small, tarantula-like Lacey. He had to move fast now, because Granite and the others would be coming in and he wanted to be free to meet them.

He stood in the mouth of the alley, hat tilted back from the high, flat planes of his long, ugly face. He had very white teeth and they showed now, in a wide grin.

He called, "I ain't ridin this mornin', gents. You can come get me right here."

Farmer, who was not bright, swung the rifle around. He had been hunched over the Remington, watching the hotel and the riders coming in.

Clymer drew with an easy, smooth motion which was effortless, and triggered at Farmer. He stepped aside and peered around for Spike and Lacey. He heard Abel babble something. He did not have to look at Farmer. It had been a point-blank shot and he knew Farmer was camped over the anvil, sprawled and at peace with whatever world he had known.

Spike was not smart, either. He stepped out, fanning two revolvers at the alley's mouth. Abel screamed at him, but Spike was maddened at the sight of Farmer dead, and throwing lead with reckless abandon. In the midst of it, Clymer fired his second bullet. He hadn't time to take good aim, and he was still looking for Lacey.

Abel fired at him then. Spike, caught in the face by the snap-shot, went over backwards and never moved again. Abel was across by the store and down behind a barrel and he shot twice at Clymer. Neither bullet came close. Abel had never been a man who could shoot under pressure. It was Lacey that worried Clymer.

He heard the sound behind him, in the alley. He leaped without turning, and that was all that saved him. Lacey had been moving, keeping out of sight until he would be able to get in a cheap shot. That was smart enough in a shenanigan like this, Clymer conceded. If Lacey had been a bit quicker he would have got him while he was engaged with Farmer and Spike.

As it was, this put him in the street between two fires, with the Hawk outfit racing for town. They could hear the shots and now they were spurring their horses. He could almost make out the individual figures as he ducked westward, away from Abel, still on the lookout for Lacey.

He heard Lacey yell and Abel answer. Now Lacey had the alley, a fine spot, the place Clymer had picked for himself. Across the way Abel could shoot at his ease, from a rest if his hand was unsteady. Clymer was between two fires, very neatly caught.

He kept moving, pausing only to throw a shot at Abel. Lacey was popping in and out, taking pot shots. Lead kicked up splinters in the boards.

Clymer could not get a clear shot. He was thinking very clearly that he had to retreat, that if he outran them he could get free and start over. He had a chance, zig-zagging, unless Lacey steadied down.

The slug was like a reata looping about his ankle. It yanked his feet nearly from under him and sat him down. He let the hammer fall on an empty chamber in his confusion, forgetting the count. He got out the left hand gun and palmed it, even remembering to holster the right hand weapon. He sat there, a fair target for them both, the blood streaming inside his boot.

He had been shot before, but this was different. This meant the end of early sunshine and long rides and the husky low laughter of pleased women and the ripple of cards in his hands. This meant the end of toil and trouble, worry and fret. This was blackout, when Lacey came from that alley.

ABEL stood up to crane and gloat. He saw Abel and thought that it was indeed strange that the canny Abel, the smart one, should make one mistake, a final error in calculation.

He ignored the certain fate from the alley's mouth. There was one last little good deed he could do before he finished his life on earth. He fired and he saw the fright in Abel's face and Abel's futile attempt to get his shot in, and then he wheeled to wait for Lacey.

Lacey did not come out. Abel tumbled into view, scrambling on all fours, screaming his agony. Abel flopped and groaned with the pain of hot metal in his lungs and then he choked and sobbed and died in the dust of Cat Street.

The riders came in. Jacob Granite held them back, dismounting in the smell of cordite and death, walking forward to where Clymer sat. Granite had his gun in his hand but on his face was only wonder and puzzlement.

Clymer said, "The alley. Lacey—a rat. Watch him, Granite. Send two men around the back . . . hurry."

Lanky and Beans rode around like a whirlwind. Granite and Besom and Morgan circled, attempting the front of the alley.

Clymer called, "He's pure pizen . . . watch him."

A small, worried looking man with a

brown bag came out of a house down the street and said, "Clymer, is that you?"

"Yeah, Doc. Got it in the foot," said Clymer. His voice was drawling, but his gun was ready, on the alley's mouth. He heard Lanky laugh, a shrill sound without mirth.

Granite holstered his gun, stepped into the alley. He came out dragging a small, limp form. He said gravely, "Reckon you got him, Clymer. Musta got him duckin' back. He's dead enough."

Clymer stared. It could not have happened, he well knew. He had not fired at Lacey. He had let some wild ones go, but he had given his attenton to Abel, not to Lacey.

The door to Linda's shop opened. She stood there, pale and shaking a little. Granite said, "Honey, this musta scared you half to death. I don't know what happened yet."

Linda's voice was steady enough. She said, "Abel Snow and those men were out to get Clymer and blame it on you. Snow wanted your spread . . . he can't expand any other way. It's plain as the nose on your face, Jacob. They were going to shoot Clymer, blame it on you, then shoot it out with your bunch."

Granite took off his hat and scratched his head. "Snow, huh? Never did cotton to him. That him over yonder?"

Clymer said, "That's Snow." He felt a little sick and very weary. Not physically weary, but tired in spirit.

Besom jerked out, "You got 'em all? Geez, Clymer!"

Granite said, "I reckon we—there's been some mistake here, Clymer. We thought. . . ."

He made himself speak quietly, distinctly, "You had a right to run me off, Granite."

The big man's honest face suffused, he swung his sombrero and shuffled his feet. He said, "Mebbe we acted too hasty-like."

"If you let me stay you'd have had fifty nesters, more'n you could handle on your land. You better send Besom and some of your men down and have them homestead to protect your range, mister. Then it can't happen again. You got to protect yourself, a man like you, with big 'holdin's."

THE doctor was cutting off his boot. He hated to see the good leather rip under the sharp knife, but there was nothing he could do about that. He did not look at Linda Corum.

Granite said, "Man, you're sure right. You done us a helluva good turn here, Clymer. How about—well, how about taking up the section again and lettin' us graze your land and mebbe runnin' a few steers of your own? How about it, Clymer?" He was hugely embarrassed but very earnest. "We kin use men like you around here. We'll get to be a county pretty soon, and need a sheriff. Looks like you're the very one for that job!"

Besom said, "He sure as hell is! Four of 'em, bushwhackin' him, and he counts 'em all!"

The doctor was hurting him right then, which prevented Clymer from saying, "Just three of them. Linda shot Lacey." Not that he would actually have said it, he thought. Leave well enough alone.

Granite said eagerly, "How about it, Clymer?" He was anxious to make amends, to clean the slate, to be forgiven, Clymer knew. He was an impulsive, good, kindly man.

Clymer said, "Why, I sure appreciate it. But you see, I got a job. I promised I'd take it. Up country, in the minin' boom. Marshal. Already signed, you see. Promised an old sidekick." He gritted his teeth against the pain and the doctor finished bandaging and he got up and they were helping him across to the saloon, gentle with their hard hands on him.

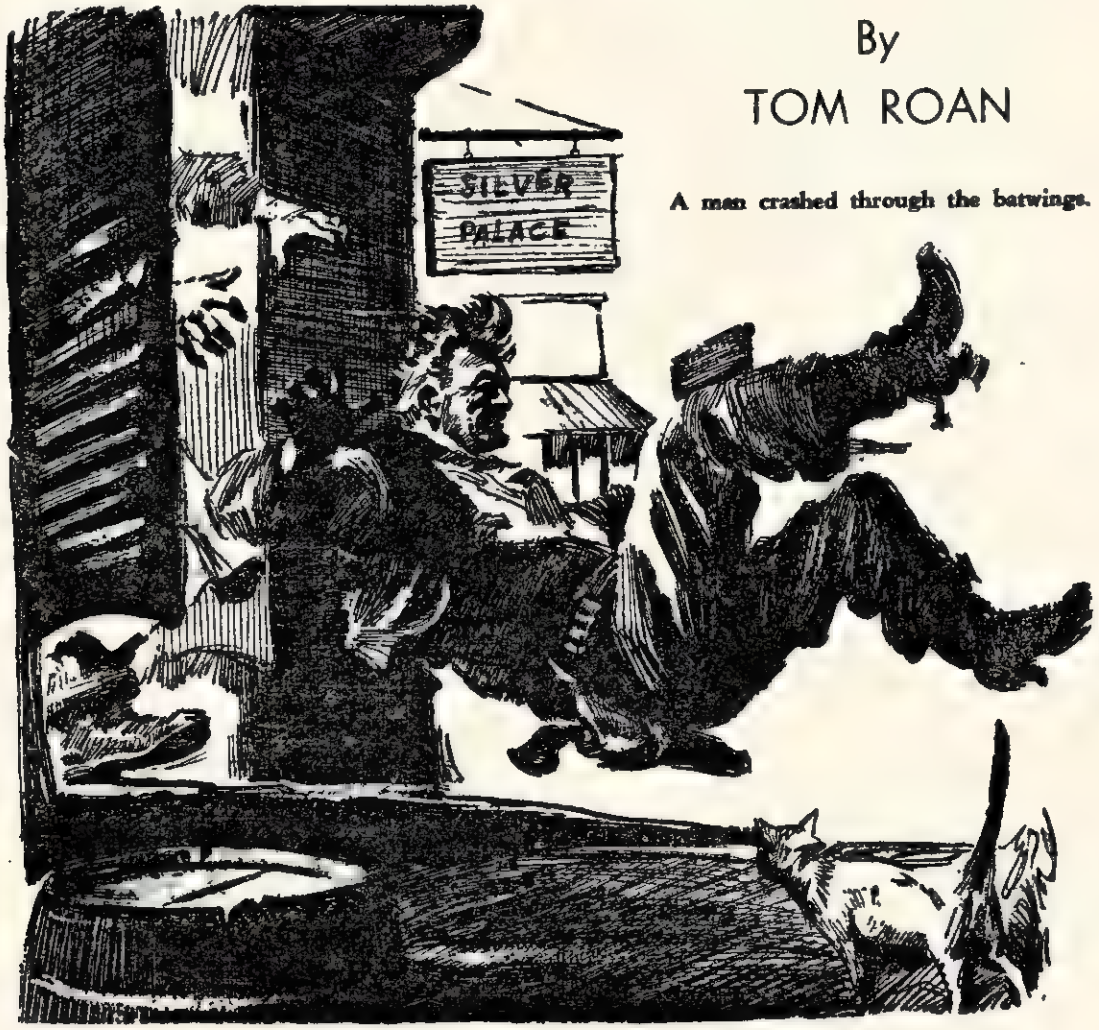
(Continued on page 129)

BILL HELL'S PISTOL CURE

When fiddle-footed Bill Hell met that golden-haired carnival girl, he vowed he'd never heed the law's Colt-backed order to drift on. His bullets would either buy the freedom of Pistol Rock's streets . . . or his bones would make their dust more bitter.

By
TOM ROAN

THE blazing-red swinging doors of the Silver Palace swung open with a fierce snapping, like bundles of firecrackers going off. The southside door tore completely off its hinges and came down on the boarded walk with a clatter. Through that opening shot a long, lean man of twenty-six or seven, who seemed to have been squeezed, kicked and pushed into a compact bundle. Like something



A man crashed through the batwings.

flying, he went over the warped boards of the old walk and landed in the thick dust in the center of the street. Gangling legs flapped out in a wide V, he sat there blinking, a slow grin beginning to crawl across his face. Now a big, wide-brimmed old gray hat sailed out of the Silver Palace, coming down with a *plop* and a puff a couple of feet to his left.

Somehow, regardless of everything else, Merry Bill Hell's hat always followed him, especially when getting thrown out of places like the Silver Palace. For the past three months, having wandered all the way northward from Mexico to this wild town of Pistol Rock, Wyoming, he had been trying to pick only the best places, knowing that their free lunch counters were usually the largest, and a wider variety of food could be had as long as a man held a ten-cent glass of beer in his hand.

Unmindful of the crowd of grinning rough-boots coming out the broken doorway and lining up on the sidewalk to watch him, he sat there for a full minute, watching the bright-blue swinging doors of the Owl Hoot Trail on the east side of the street as if expecting other lightning events to take place in this man's town before very long. Then he saw the girl, blinked again, and stared, thinking that he had probably been hit a little too hard on the head and was seeing something that was not there.

She was small and pretty, golden-haired and blue-eyed, coming briskly up the sidewalk on the other side of the street. In an instant Bill Hell had decided that she was about the prettiest thing he had ever seen on a pair of feet, but her garb seemed all out of place. Wearing black velvet trousers, a shiny black shirtwaist and a small, flat-brimmed blue hat silver-spangled and cocked to the left at a rakish angle, she looked like a bull-fighter dropped right out of the middle of old Spain. He saw her pause, saw her stare at him, and then tilt her pretty chin and hurry on past the Owl Hoot Trail as a roar of laughter broke out from the gang of half-drunk rowdies lined up in front of the Silver Palace.

It was a good thing that the girl did clear the front of the Owl Hoot Trail just when she did. The blue doors there whammed open, and through the opening sailed a little one-eyed Mexican in once white cotton trousers, worn sandals, and a ragged black shirt on his back. Hatless like Bill Hell, he came on, a huge guitar held against his chest. He landed on his bottom as Hell had landed, a cloud of dust flying up. As soon as he could see he looked at the *Americano* and grinned.

"Well, *Señor* Beel," he intoned in broken English, "eet ees always the same. Never for wance does it change. But," he shrugged, switching to Spanish, "it is what we are to expect, I suppose, for not staying in Mexico where, as I have told you a thousand times, I could find us two women—fat or lean making little difference—who would be willing to do all the work and furnish the meals. As far as the beer, they would make that, too, and we would never have to worry from morning until night. I, Pedro the Great, would charm them as the cat and the snake charm the mice and the birds with," he slapped the guitar, "my wonderful songs and my wonderful, wonderful guitar!"

"Did you get anything to eat?"

"Oh, but to be sure, my friend!" His eyes sparkled. "I was doing very well at the beginning. I had six or seven fat sausage sandwiches and about a dozen fine pickles. Feeling grateful like the grateful man I am, I started to play and sing them a song. But, *señor*," he shook his head sadly, "for some reason they didn't like it, and then the trouble fell on me like a house falling apart on my head!"

"How long do yuh bums think I'm goin' to let yuh stay in Pistol Rock without kickin' yuh naked an' throwin' yuh

in jail!" a loud, angry voice demanded.

A BIG red-faced man had come up behind Bill Hell, richly garbed in whipcord pants, a pearl-white hat, fancy black and white-checked shirt and a beaded buckskin vest, two silver-mounted six-shooters dangling from carved holsters . . . and a gold star.

"I'm Steel Savage," he was going right on, giving Hell no chance to answer him until he was through. "Head marshal here—an' I run Pistol Rock. I'll give yuh two just ten minutes to clear the town—an' take that damned horse an' the jackass with yuh, do yuh hear!"

"Sure!" Bill Hell pulled his hands out of the dust and got to his feet, an old Colt still dangling to a worn, almost empty cartridge belt. "Thanks for all the spare time. We're not always given as much in a lot of places we've been. Right down nice of you!"

Picking up his hat, he brushed it by slapping it against his dusty right leg, then he moved on to the long watering trough. In a couple of seconds he had whipped off his topshirt and was briskly washing his face and hands, the little Mexican waiting to do the same thing.

"An' don't come back when yuh start movin'!" ordered the marshal, standing there wide-legged glaring at them. "We don't like tramps an' bums in this town."

Cleaner in two or three minutes, Bill Hell led the way back to the hitchrack, Pedro the Great's face still dripping as he followed at his heels, the marshal slow-trailing, watching them with a hard downward twist on his lips. Knowing that to talk here would only start a fight and get them both landed heels over head in jail, Bill Hell swung quietly into his saddle, Pedro the Great bouncing to a ragged blanket that served as a saddle for his jack. With a sudden burst of laughter from each side as they turned away, they headed on up the street, going to try the hospitality of Danger River, a little town twenty miles northward.

"*Señor,* did you get to eat?"

"A piece of pickled herring as large as your little finger just before somebody hit me behind the ear and knocked me on my head between the footrail and the bar." Bill Hell grinned from ear to ear and rubbed a sore spot just behind his jaw. "But no matter, Pedro. Somewhere in Wyoming, Montana or Idaho we'll find a job—and go to work!"

"*Work!*" Pedro looked at him with sudden alarm in his eyes. "My God, *señor,* did they knock the last of the little brains you have out of your head! *Work!* I am an artist with songs in my heart. I shall die an artist, *señor,* and make them all happy in Heaven with my songs and my wonderful guitar!"

"Yeah," nodded Hell, seriously, "I can almost see it from here—and hear the doors coming down!"

Music struck them full-blast when they were nearly at the head of the street. At once Hell recognized it as the wailing of a steam calliope off toward the shabby-brown depot at the end of the railroad line coming up from southward. In a moment more they could see the cone-shaped top of a huge, coral-colored tent.

"*Señor, señor!*" cried the little Mexican, good right eye suddenly bright. "Eet ees what the man called the flying jeeney in Texas!"

"Yes, it's a merry-go-round, Pedro." Absently, Bill Hell let the bay swing toward it. "Maybe we still have time for a look as we go past. But don't look for a free lunch in this direction!"

THEY were soon in sight of the rest of it, a large affair of shining metalwork and many-colored bright trimmings, looking as if it was polished and retouched every day to keep it that way. On the platform going around and around were elaborately decorated carriages, wooden

horses with flying tails, lions, tigers and zebras, A short man with silver hair and red-apple cheeks was selling tickets from a brightly painted little booth, another taller, leaner and older handling the engine at an upright steam boiler. One look at that crowd made a man wonder where all the women and children had come from in a town like Pistol Rock. Then Bill Hell saw the girl he had seen down the street.

The girl evidently took up the tickets each time the merry-go-round was started. Now she sat on a bench in front of a giant steam calliope, going around and around on the turning platform, her hands flying like beating wings, steam spurting in a silvery cloud above her. Right now she was playing a lively thing that sounded like *Hell Among the Yearlings* while children on the sidelines began to cheer.

Here was happiness personified, innocent fun in full-swing. Bill Hell kept on until he was just behind the crowd. Pedro swung in to his right, both forgetting the warning to leave town in ten mintues. For a moment Hell caught himself thinking of stopping and taking a ride himself, then suddenly remembered that he had exactly sixty-seven cents in his pocket—and Pedro would have even less than that.

But it didn't cost anything to watch that pretty girl play the calliope. As she came wheeling around again Hell saw her turn her head and look at him and Pedro. That she recognized him was a certainty—and despite the fact that he and Pedro the Great were much cleaner now. Hell saw her look straight at him and the little Mexican, the latter now with a huge old sombrero with an up-cupped, foot-wide brim on his shaggy head. She laughed suddenly, buckling forward over the keys, missing a couple of notes on the steam-squirting old instrument.

That couldn't be too bad, Hell thought. Anybody who laughed at a man could not exactly hate him. The next time she came wheeling around he lifted his big hat and grinned at her. She nodded, and laughed again, this time managing to keep the steam squirting and not missing a note. Then, so suddenly it was like lightning crashing out of a perfectly calm sky, a rifle splintered its report down on the scene, drowning out the music, stilling the laughter.

It was as though fun and laughter and music had no place here in this town of Pistol Rock. A foot-thick silvered ball on top of the little ticket booth was suddenly not there at all, a bullet having shattered it into a thousand bits of flying glass. Now another shot drove a bullet straight to the brass whistle on the top of the upright boiler where the taller, leaner old man was just thrusting more wood in the firebox. Another bullet knocked a forefoot off a rocking lion as the girl came wheeling around again. That bullet went on, glanced on the hardwood platform, and smashed into the side of the calliope just to the girl's left.

IN A matter of seconds, gaiety turned to sudden cries of terror, panic stricken children leaping and falling from the merry-go-round, women surging forward and then back, screams filling the air, the man at the boiler shutting the engine down, the noise of the callope ending in a crash, the girl flying off her bench, tumbling it over and getting behind it.

There was rank pandemonium. No one seemed to know why or where those shots were coming from for several seconds. But they were still coming, the bullets popping, slapping, splattering and wailing.

The platform made another complete round before the engine could bring it to a halt. The calliope came back, the pretty girl down beside it now, the bench in front of her. Suddenly, as if not realizing what she was doing, she threw the bench aside, leaped to her feet with a bullet striking right between them. Rushing forward

now, she was trying to help wailing and screaming children down from the carriages and the animals they were still riding.

Pedro the Great was no better than the rest. Ordinarily he would put up a fight, but now he was unarmed, having sold an old-fashioned Smith & Wesson weeks ago in Arizona for them to eat on the few dollars he had received for it. With a yell he left his jack', scooted forward and dropped behind a big slab of rock. At first he had hit the ground on his stomach, then he had wheeled up and was now snatching at running children and pulling them down behind the rock with him to prevent them from being hurt.

It was something else with Merry Bell Hell. The Colt was still sagged behind his hip, still full of dust from that toss into the dusty street, but it would shoot. Looking around to the right he saw at once where the shots were coming from. Six or seven masked men were up on the high roof of a tar-paper-covered old warehouse, each shooting with a rifle. Then the old man at the boiler yelled and clutched at his right shoulder, blood slivering through his fingers as he went down after trying to snatch up a double-barreled shotgun.

This was something no man could stand. Merry Bill Hell started shooting. His first bullet seemed to lift a man off his feet, flap him forward and hang him over the three-foot rise along the edge of the roof, leaving him there like a saddle hung over a fence. Instantly, he was downing another, rocking him back with a bullet that caught him just above the right eye. Another took a ball through the left shoulder, another through the chest. The rest had had enough. Wheeling, leaving their dead and wounded behind them, they were suddenly fleeing, leaving the milling, crying and screaming behind them.

"*Señor,* now we go to jail!" cried Pedro when he could make himself heard. "*Sacre Madre,* we seem to be always getting the seats of our pants kicked out and thrown in jail these days! It is a bad business, I say!"

Out of his saddle, Hell was going forward, reloading the Colt from the eleven cartridges left in his shabby old belt. Getting some of the children quiet, the pretty girl rushed to him, terror still in her big blue eyes and face.

"Don't stay here now!" she cried. "I saw what you did! They'll kill you for it —and we can't do anything to help you!"

"But why," he asked, "did they start shooting into a crowd of women and children like this? Are they crazy?"

"We have our State license!" she cried back at him. "We have a license from the town here to run our merry-go-round, but there are others in Pistol Rock who have demanded money—and we won't pay it!"

"All right!" he told her. "Whatever it is, I seem to be in it— and I'm not much at running away when I'm really into something."

"But Steel Savage will put you in jail and throw the key away!"

"I'm not afraid of 'im, ma'am!" He grinned at her now. "Not even that bad name he carries so handily. Let's see the old man who's shot."

MEN were coming up by this time, two long, thick streams of them. One stream was from down the street, headed by the important-looking Marshal Steel Savage. The other was coming up from down the railroad tracks, swinging to the left just below the depot. That string was headed by an immense man in dead-black, a large slouch black hat on his white-haired head. He carried no weapons, but the men behind him were armed with shotguns, rifles and six-shooters—grim-faced and ready to fight if they had to.

A woman screamed: "Parson Stone! Parson Stone! My God, this is awful, *awful!*"

"I have seen it worse in other places!"

The preacher lifted a big hand. "Such menaces as we have in this town seem always to get worse and worse before a vigilance committee is formed. Marshal," his voice shot up as he looked at the all-important Steel Savage, "I'm holding you directly responsible for this!"

"Yo're holdin' me responsible!" The big marshal stopped, glaring at him. "Hell, sky-pilot, I'm not to blame! Them two are!" He jerked up a big red hand and stabbed a finger at Merry Bill Hell and Pedro. "They started trouble right after they hit town—the sloppy bums!"

"We saw it all, Savage!" The preacher glared back at him. "This man," he pointed to Hell, "was the only one who had the courgage to fight back! And more than that, Mr. Savage, we know exactly where you stand. The best thing you can do now is to get your cronies off that roof, dead or alive, and quietly take yourself away from here. There can be such a thing as a wholesale lynching in this town—and one man who calls himself Steel Savage *might* be among the first to stretch the hemp!"

"That's damn plain talk, fella!" Savage's face had gone white. "By Gawd, I don't like it worth a damn!"

"Get away from here—now!" The big preacher moved toward him, fire appearing to sparkle in his pale eyes, the string behind him stepping to one side, weapons half-up and ready. "Otherwise I'm liable to forget myself and stomp your face in the ground!"

"All right!" Scared now, Savage turned. "But I still say them two bums started ever'thing, an' I'll fix their wagons later. They know how long I gave 'em to get outa town!"

"And maybe," cried the girl, "they'll not go anywhere now! Not on orders from a brutal beast like you!"

"That's gospel, Savage!" Preacher Stone was laughing at him now. "It may be your salvation if you only listen to it. Your time of ruling here with your brutal henchmen is just about up. You've been told that before this! Send a doctor here—and don't be too long about it or I'll come down the street with these men behind me and have more to say!"

With silence restored, men quietly taking wounded and dead off the roof of the warehouse, a short, bald-headed doctor by the name of Shane came hurrying up with a couple of black bags. The wounded man beside the boiler was soon having his shoulder dressed, the doctor finding a broken bone.

By this time Bill Hell was getting acquainted, many of the women and children still remaining to stand and stare, others hurring away like scared hens and chicks. The girl was Jean Harper, the man who sold the tickets George, her father. The wounded man was Jim Harper, older brother of George. But when it came to Bill Hell to give up his name he turned red from his throat to the roots of his hair.

"But that's it," he told the girl and the preacher, grimly. "'Way back two or two hundred and fifty years ago, some of them spelled it *H-e-i-l*. Most people pronounced it *Heel*, some *Hail*, others just plain *Hell*. My great-great-great-grandfather spelled it as *Hell* back in Virginia, and the rest of us were stuck with it, but I always feel a little funny when I have to tell it."

"You were just like your name a little while ago, all right, young man!" Stone put a big hand on his shoulder and smiled broadly. "But what's in a name! A place like Pistol Rock could use a lot just like you. Stay with us. Do what you can to help this fine young lady, her father and her uncle. I think my crowd is growing. One day we'll see a decent town here—and then go all out to change the name of it!"

"But Steel Savage won't let him alone!" put in the girl. "They'll hound him and his friend now, jail them, maybe kill them in cold blood!"

"Just the same," nodded Hell, his decision bringing a low groan of despair from the listening Pedro behind them, "we'll stay. As long as we can eat we'll not worry much about money. That right, Pedro?"

"*Señor,* for sure and for sure, of course!" The Mexican opened his hands and shrugged hopelessly. "What else could I say when I ride with a man who calls himself *Hell? Diablo,* it could not be worse!"

"GET 'EM? Why, hell and damn, yes! No pair like that can buck me an' get away with it. Damn it, *I run this town!*" Steel Savage struck the round table in a bolted rear room of the Silver Palace, glaring at the faces of men in the lamplight a couple of hours after darkness had settled. "I never back water, never have, never will. All of you know that I carry through anything I undertake. Any damn thing!"

There were sixteen men here, most of them having been let in at the now closed and bolted rear door. Seven were at the big table with him, seated in stout chairs, the others making a close double line behind them, all of them hard and dangerous, many wanted in no less than a score of places. Not one of them, drunk, asleep or awake, would ever let himself be caught a foot away from a six-shooter.

Steel Savage had had a good thing here. No man would have wanted to see himself slipping or losing even the smallest part of it. In every town and city in the country from the east to the west, there were men like him, each grasping for power, for wealth, for absolute control of the people surrounding him. In another year they would see this man running for judge, cutting the feet from under old Judge Ben Rider—a fat, red-faced whiskey-tank in a silk hat, cut-away coat, striped trousers, and fancy vests usually spotted with tobacco from the thick lips under drooping, sand-colored mustaches. Rider was damned cautious, an old bird trying to sit astride of the fence, keeping his hand in with both sides of the town, not wanting to lose a single vote at election time.

"Hoss Davis, Ike Leeds, Rube Jackson and Trigger Sam played the damned fools!" Savage was going on. "Hoss and Ike dyin' the first damn thing, Rube gettin' a bullet through the shoulder, Trigger through the chest—funeral for two, doctor bills for two. Yuh other three had enough sense to do what yuh was told." He looked up at three big dark-beards. "An' yo're alive an' unhurt!"

"We followed orders, Steel!" One of the men grinned. "I shot the ball off the ticket booth. Abe Rice curved the whistle over. Dude shot at the guy-lines, like the others was supposed to do. If we'd busted only a couple of 'em the top of the tent woulda keeled over making plenty of hell an' excitement but nobody gettin' hurt serious."

"I know!" Savage lifted an impatient hand. "But what's done is done. Silver Joe Stone, that damned preacher, is to be dealt with now. He seems to pick up more and more power 'round here. We'll get back at him through that cowboy an' the one-eyed Mexican—as a starter. But we'd have to have a mighty fine reason right now for killing either one of them here in town."

"Take the Mexican, an' the cowboy'll follow." Abe Rice answered him, leaning forward with a grin. "Take the damn girl, if yuh have to, an' that'll put the fear of hell in her ol' man an' her uncle. They'd slap the preacher an' his crowd in the face an' burn down their own flyin' jenny to get her back safe an' sound. Yuh won't be in none of it, 'cause yo'll be right here in town, in sight of ever'body. Hell, we've done things like that before—me an' Dude an' Booley Cline! Things like that may be old, but, by Gawd, they work ever'time!"

"Kidnappin', huh?" Savage sat there scowling at the table for a few moments, then glanced up. "It's a word that never set well on my stomach, but it might work. We'll think about it. Takin' the Mexican won't mean that. It'll be like wroppin' a string 'round a dog's neck an' leadin' 'im off with another followin'—an' shootin' 'em both in a nice, quiet place. Keep away from the Harpers an' that flyin' jenny until I tell yuh what to do. I want that damn preacher to think he's scared the livin' hell out of me an' the rest of yuh—him an' his big-mouthed talk about *vigilantes!* That's almost as old as scarin' folks by talk of Hell!"

FOR seven days there was absolute peace. Parson Stone was always showing up with several of the men who were backing him, and there was a good reason for it. Twenty cents out of every dollar the merry-go-round took in was thrown into a fund to erect a big school house on a wide flat at the head of the town. Feeling safe again, women and children came back in droves. Shoulder in a bandage, old Jim Harper was able to take over the ticket booth, his brother George switching to the job of firing the boiler and running the engine.

Pedro the Great had never had such a good job, helping to take the tickets and beating on the huge guitar to try to keep up with the calliope, and getting free rides hour after hour from one o'clock in the afternoon to ten at night. Merry Bill Hell had the worst of it, sitting there in the darkness night after night with a Winchester to see that no one sneaked up and burned the merry-go-round to the ground—something sorely expected by the preacher and the rest of them. Another good month's run would see the school house fund well on its way. By that time the merry-go-round would be getting old to the children and about ready to pack up, load aboard a flatcar and a boxcar, moving on to some place down the line to start another school house fund.

The seventh day found Hell and Pedro with money—fifteen dollars each whether they wanted to take it or not, and both had been fed and literally stuffed by the girl for the week. Life was good! Hell bought a couple of shirts, a new pair of denims, and had an extra pair of boots repaired and polished. Pedro did almost the same—and fell by the wayside, getting himself a gallon of wine and slipping away to drink and dream of the warmth and women of Mexico.

Steel Savage, a big woman with dyed red hair on his arm, appeared at the merry-go-round at nine-thirty in the evening. With them were two of his well-known men, black-haired Dude Rice and Booley Cline, each with a close shave tonight, and each with a woman on his arm. Savage was the most agreeable anybody had ever seen him. Laughing at the slightest thing, he bought tickets for all of them for the last five runs, and the little crowd climbed aboard horses, lions and tigers—all of them apparently having the time of their lives.

"Something's coming." Parson Stone eased up out of the shadows just behind the boiler and spoke quietly to Merry Bill Hell. "We don't yet know just what it is, but it's not anything good. Watch yourself."

He was gone as quickly as he had come, the merry-go-round wheeling on and on, the girl playing at the calliope. The last ride came, and Savage and his little crowd got aboard. Jean Harper was playing Home Sweet Home. A rather brisk wind had been blowing up from the south since sundown, and was now carrying the music far north of town. When Home Sweet Home was getting near the end, Merry Bill Hell heard Pedro the Great yelling his head off, heard hoofs coming up the street in a pounding fury, then four men yelling as if to drown out Pedro. When

they flung into sight in the moonlight they started shooting in the air.

Pedro was in a fix. Hands bound behind him, mouth not gagged so that he could yell, he was across the lap of the leading horseman, belly-down, legs kicking, the noise he was making loud enough to drown out the calliope and throw everybody into a high pitch of excitement.

Merry Bill Hell did the only thing he could do. He whipped up his Winchester, taking careful aim at that leading horse, hating the idea of having to down him. He squeezed the trigger, the rifle cutting a flame through the night, and the horse was suddenly going down, the dust boiling, Pedro's voice coming, wider and more terrorized than before:

"Señor Beel! Señor Bell! They are taking me away to kill me!"

EVERYTHING was in an uproar by this time, the merry-go-round being brought to a stop, the calliope shutting off with a final burst of steam, women and children beginning to scream. Steel Savage and the two men with him were leaping off, sawing at their six-shooters. Merry Bill Hell was still shooting, seeing Pedro now coming out of the dust, hands behind him and running like a scared rabbit, three of the men behind him shooting at him.

It was hell—sudden hell. Savage and his two men started yelling and shooting. Hell saw Pedro go down, heard him wailing in a clump of brush, and fired again and saw a man come tumbling out of a saddle. Then another burst of gunfire was coming from the roof of the big old warehouse.

A great bundle of rags, oil-soaked and tied together with strings, the inside weighted with a brick, now sailed straight for the top of the merry-go-round. Strings breaking, the blazing rags scattered in all directions and came sliding slowly down the steep pitch of the roof.

Gunfire was ringing from all sides now, many bullets slapping into the merry-go-round. Bill Hell was blazing at the men on the warehouse roof when he heard Jean Harper's voice:

"The tent's fireproofed! The latest fabric we could buy! Don't worry about fire!"

Bill Hell saw Savage and his two men hurrying on to the street, the three still shooting. Pedro wailed miserably when Savage suddenly threw a shot at him. The next moment, Savage was yelling himself as Hell caught him with a bullet through the thigh, breaking a bone and pitching him forward on his face.

"Shut it down!" Hurt for the first time, Steel Savage was now yelling louder than any of the others. *"Down! This is Steel Savage! Shut it down!* I'm shot!"

"And once hurt, you cry like a baby, Marshal Savage." The preacher was looming over the writhing figure two minutes later, the gunfire suddenly dying away in all directions, the last of the burning rags being whipped out with water-dripping grain bags. "I believe it is usually that way with your kind. You can hurt others and stand back and laugh. When it comes home to you—you cry! I'm sorry, Marshal, but I warned you."

Men were closing in from everywhere, no less than seventy of them—some having quietly come from as far away as Danger River several days ago. Hurrying to meet the limping Pedro, Bill Hell found that he had a bullet hole through the calf of the right leg. Another had gone through the muscle of the left arm, another giving him a hard rake across the right shoulder—wounds that would soon heal with the proper care.

"It was the fault of the *vino, señor!*" he cried. "I did not see them sneak up. Look! From where come all the men with all the guns!"

"I wouldn't know, Pedro." Bill Hell had an arm around him, helping him

along. "All I'm supposed to do is to watch the flying jenny."

Hoofs were pounding up and down the street, bursts of yells lifting here and there.

"What is it, Bill!" Jean Harper came out of the shadows, white-faced and trembling. "What are they doing!"

"I—I wouldn't know, Jean," he said as he eased Pedro to the ground. "But it looks like the parson was right."

"Surely not lynch law, Bill!" She grabbed his arm, leaning against him, a sudden sob shaking her. "Did—it have to come to that!"

"Some men will never stop without it, Jean!" He slipped a quick arm around her. "Maybe it won't go too far. Maybe they'll just round-up the last man of the marshal's gang. Somebody's going to start talking when they see the ropes. But don't think about it!" His arm tightened. "Maybe after this women and children can come here in peace."

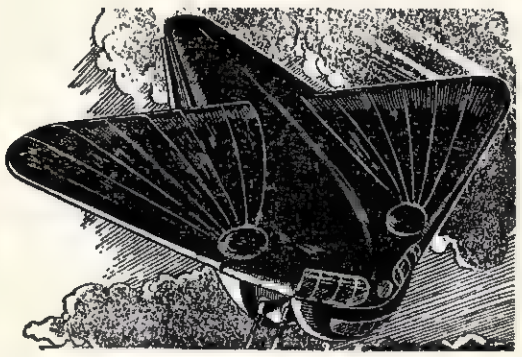
"And—and," she was trying to get even closer, "you'll stay on with us, you and little Pedro!"

"You'd break Pedro's heart if you tried to drive him away!" He made an attempt to laugh. "And far as me, Jean," again that arm tightened, "I never knew what happiness was until I came to you folks."

Yells came from down the street, men cursing each other, men blaming each other. Out of the noise came Steel Savage's voice just once more:

"Damn it, they're all turning against me! Now, by Gawd, I'm goin' to tell yuh all about them—the double-crossers!"

"Don't listen, Jean." Gently, Merry Bill Hell had taken the girl in his arms. "With Parson Stone behind it, it won't go too far—just far enough to assure decency in Pistol Rock from now on."



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WINGED KILLER

"GOLDEN EAGLE!" they called him, all save the old Indian trapper who watched the great sky heller fold his wings and plummet to strike down a nearly fully grown loon before it could dive. This oldster made a clucking sound with his tongue and exclaimed: "Yeepek . . . *Mucha Satan!*"

Thus it was Yeepek, the young but huge bald eagle, came to the marshes around Big Lake, to scatter the waterfowl, to send the muskrat families swimming sharply to the cover of their runs, and to cause commotion at those early farmsteads which had poultry. . . .

This morning, high in a clear blue sky, the big-winged buccaneer, Yeepek, planed idly, now and then sending down a piercing shriek.

At the homestead yard, Carl Winters called to his young wife and pointed upward. Together they watched Yeepek, now a speck in the distance, now in full view, effortlessly keeping in motion by his easy, graceful banks and glides.

Carl Winters turned suddenly towards the lake. Never had he seen so many ducks. He was still intently looking when his wife called out. Winters jerked up his head to see Yeepek diving.

Neither the flashing fangs of the woodland killers, nor the deadly menace of the man creature's hot lead and cold steel, could rob Yeepek, the winged buccaneer of Big Lake, of his savage and majestic heritage!

Yeepek had a wingspread of nearly six feet, despite the fact that he had not yet attained the white head marking of his parents. He was a young swashbuckler, a buccaneer of the skyways, who had long since left the eyrie to fend for himself.

The big eagle carried his catch far off and quickly appeased his hunger. He stood, staring balefully about him, disdainful of the raucous cawing of the crows who milled about, warning and protecting their still immature young. Out on the lake pandemonium reigned. Old Moakwa, the loon chieftain, sent out his ghostly cries which caused ducks and grebes to scutter from bay to bay.

Back at the remnants of his kill, Yeepek stretched his neck forward and gave out a gasped hissing sound before at last settling to preen himself before he slept. . . .

Birds and the small wild animal life of the lake country became more and more alerted as their young developed.

A flight of geese had just come in. One of its members was a straggler, a bird which had a peculiar flopping action in flight. Winters had seen this runt of the flight many times. He figured it was because of this runtling that the geese had not moved farther north, to wilder, safer lakes.

He made a sharp sound with his tongue against the back of his teeth. In the lead of the flight the old gander honked his warnings. The struggling young one in the rear began to spill himself down, hoping to reach some safe haven, but the speed and accuracy of Yeepek were terrific. He caught the goose at about two feet above water. There was a thudding splash. . . .

Carl Winters' forehead ridged with a sharp frown. He said something under his breath as he turned and strode to his house. Soon he was out again, carrying his Winchester rifle. Yeepek, he knew, could become a menace even after the

OF BIG LAKE •

By
HAROLD F.
CRUICKSHANK

The fox slashed upward.

migratory waterfowl left for the south. Yeepek would be a grave menace to the traplines in winter. . . .

Marge Winters moved about her poultry runs, hesitating to let the chickens out this morning. Her husband moved down an incline to the brush-studded flat alongside the lake. He had seen Yeepek rise with his catch and head for a thick belt of poplars and willows. But he realized that the big young bald eagle would be an elusive target for a rifle, and an impossible target for a shotgun, because of his alertness and wariness. However, the young homesteader hoped he could at least scare the big killer off.

AT THE first sharp crack of a piece of dry windfall wood, Yeepek became alert. He gaped his powerful beak and his deathly cold eyes began to blaze, then suddenly he rose. A thunder-sound crashed. He felt a touch on his secondary wing feathers, a light touch attended by a sharp whining sound.

Yeepek wisely flew low, banking to keep a screening of the woods between him and the man as with little effort he winged his way from danger.

Below, at the woods, Winters glimpsed a flash of the big one and again sighted and pulled, but Yeepek gracefully banked and with amazing speed, and seemingly slight effort suddenly became a speck in the sky, utterly out of range.

As he banked he sent out a wild shriek of contempt and defiance, then resumed his idle planing high aloft where none could follow. . . .

As the early summer moved on to full summer, Yeepek whirled about the lake and marshes, watching over the creatures that were his prey.

Close to sunset this evening he came down, settling on a tuft of marsh grass and listening to the chuttering, clucking sounds of the waterfowl, or the fainter sounds of feeding muskrats. Suddenly his neck stiffened. He fluffed out his feathers and a low husky gasp escaped him as his keen eyes glimpsed a fox stalking through the marsh grass toward a muskrat house.

Here in this fox creature was an intruder, a poacher—bent on plundering the rat runs.

When suddenly the vixen streaked forward and struck at a rat, Yeepek rose easily, gracefully. . . . He planed over a wide area as if to be sure of his timing, then suddenly he struck downward.

The vixen had caught the flash of his shadow. She spun, her jaws dripping blood, and as Yeepek came within range, she leaped nimbly to one side, and struck upward. Her fangs bit through the packed feathers on his breast. He felt the sharp lances and screamed. Fire now poured from his terrible eyes as he surged upward, flapping his gigantic wings.

Like lightning he came down, striking sharply with his right wing shoulder. He caught the vixen a sharp blow, sending her toppling, but she was amazingly agile and came up lunging as he struck again.

Thus the fight went on. A sudden lull was cast over the entire lake area, as if instinctively the waterfowl and the mammals realized that a grim drama was being enacted in the sedges.

The light was slowly fading, and Yeepek was conscious of this. His enemy was of nocturnal habits, able to see well in the dark while his own vision would dim with the dimming light.

Fangs slashed at one of his legs. Again he screamed his anger as he whirled out of range, then struck again.

The vixen stood her ground, leaping, twisting, striking. But Yeepek was not to be denied. He had the advantage of maneuverability and now attacked with more caution and wisdom. Suddenly he feinted. The vixen leaped for him, but he lifted himself quickly out of range suddenly to bank and strike, all in the one amazing move.

He struck the vixen full in the chest with both sets of talons, rocking her back. She put forward all her strength in an effort to close her fangs on his head, but Yeepek's head worked like lightning and shortly, the little fox sagged. . . .

Yeepek hissed and gasped as he tore and ripped . . .

Bloody, but his keen appetite satisfied, Yeepek rose and soared off to a tall old fire-killed tamarac, there to spend the night. Yeepek was king of all the great-winged sky buccaneers, and before he settled to rest for the night, he sent out a terrible cry, a piercing shriek, as if to warn all creatures of his power and his majesty.

VAIN, swaggering, Yeepek plundered the lake country throughout the summer, sparing no creature or bird which came within his range.

As the autumn winds whistled through the first frosty night, Yeepek ruffled his feathers and hissed back into the teeth of the wind.

His eyes glared as he heard the bugling of the whistling swans and the raucous honk of geese in flight from the north. Now and then he shrieked counter challenges. These were bigger birds, and instinctively Yeepek realized that he would meet his match if he engaged in battle with a big old cob swan. Throughout the frosty night he listened to the sounds of the newcomers, far out on the lake. At dawn, when he planed over the inshore sedges and bays in search of some unwary pintail or mallard, he was disappointed. There had been a sudden exodus of the lesser waterfowl—as if the ducks, coots and grebes had moved to the deep water and the protection of their great cousins, the swans and geese.

Yeepek turned inland and savagely struck down at a sleeping rabbit, whose fur and hide he ripped fiercely. But in his next hunt he found a scarcity of game which alarmed him. In the whole of one day he did not secure for himself a single gopher. To anger him the more, a strutting cock grouse got clear when he whistled down on a copse. The old cock was wary and had quickly fluttered to the cover of tangled undergrowth.

Thus the great-winged Yeepek became hungry, and as his hunger mounted, he became bolder.

Diurnal in his habit, he was forced at last to hunt when the owls came down over the marshes. A pair of horned owls swooped silently down over the muskrat runs at dusk, and Yeepek followed. He blinked as he watched the owls hover over the sedges. When suddenly Ah-hoo, the biggest owl struck, Yeepek folded his wings, plummeting down like a stone.

Ah-hoo's talons had barely struck their target when Yeepek was in to clamp his claws over the young muskrat's back.

Ah-hoo gasped. His eyes blazed as he whirled and flapped his wings, batting with them to confuse the big eagle while from above, the second owl planed and banked to strik.

Yeepek shrieked his curses as he gave battle. On the ground he was a formidable fighter, but when forced to rise, the smaller, though no less savage birds, were more than a match for him. He hadn't their maneuverability. His size and the size of his wingspread were against him.

When he attempted to rush and seize the rat he had been forced to relinquish, both owls converged on him. He slashed out and succeeded in knocking feathers from the breast of Ah-hoo's mate, but Ah-hoo himself banked and spilled sharply, striking down with a set of rowelling talons which found their objective. . . .

Yeepek hissed and shrieked as he fluttered back. One of his eyes was badly cut. It's vision was completely gone and in the fading light, the big eagle could hardly see. But in his anger, he suddenly rushed forward, drove his talons into the

back of the rat and took off, his great wings clearing a pathway past the owls.

Yeepek, the swashbuckler, had suffered his first defeat. The odds had been too heavy against him, but in defeat he had gained the muskrat.

Back at his lookout tamarac he tore the rat flesh and gulped it with more than usual savagery, pausing every now and then to shriek his curses across the sedges where the owls hunted in vain for other muskrats. Yeepek, the young king, had been taught a sharp lesson, one he would never forget. He had learned, at the cost of one eye, that a pair of horned owls, among the most savage of the winged killers, must be left severely alone. He also learned that he must confine his hunting now more than ever to the daylight hours. . . .

The coming of the white feathers on head and neck brought him to maturity, but they did not guarantee him the natural wisdom of his great parents. . . . He must acquire such wisdom by experience as well as by instinct. . . .

SOME days passed before Yeepek could become accustomed to the loss of his eye. Because of his loss, when again he began to hunt, Yeepek found that he had to acquire and practice a new set of tactics, and learn to maneuver so that he could scout from the open side . . .

Below at his farmstead, Carl Winters watched the strange actions of his enemy. He pointed these out to his wife.

"He ain't actin' natural, Marge," he said. "You watch him when he's ready to swoop down; he always has to turn an' come in on his right side. Mebbe I did him some injury when I shot at him a while back. . . ."

Winters chuckled softly. Any damage done to so great a scourge was, from his point of view, all to the good, but his wife did not altogether subscribe to this attitude. Marge Winters, for all her concern for her poultry, had a strong feeling that the creatures of the wilderness which were here before the advent of the homesteader, had the right to live their lives and practice their habits in their own way.

She did, however, start when she saw Yeepek suddenly attacked by a colony of blackbirds. The small birds in unison harried him, chased him, seeming to attack and peck at him always from his left side. Though they could do no serious damage, they succeeded in chasing him off.

In savage anger Yeepek turned inland to vent his spite on some small land creature—perhaps a gopher or a scurrying field mouse.

Now and then, in pompous majesty, Yeepek made it clear to all the feathered creatures on the lake and in the sedges that he was still a fierce power to cope with. Just before sunset this evening, following up two hunting marsh owls, he suddenly careened away and struck down with amazing speed. His talons spread and then closed grimly on the back of a young, flapping goose. The snow goose sent out raucous cries, cries which reached the homesteader at his yard chores. Winters spun to face his wife . . .

"It's him, Marge. Reckon I didn't do him too much harm at that. He's got himself a goose. Listen. . . ." And Marge Winters twisted her face as she listened to another grim tragedy of the wilderness. . . .

The snow came and with its sharply driven flakes, the swans took off, to ride ahead of the storm. With a bedlam of sound the big geese flights winged up for altitude above the storm. . . .

Below, on the ice-fringed bays, several species of ducks still remained, scuttling about, quacking, gabbling as they found the shelter of tules. But Yeepek welcomed the coming of the white weather. He and his kind thrived in winter and on his tall tamarac he spread his wide wings, flap-

ping them as he hissed and shrieked in wild ecstasy.

Shortly, any small creature moving over the snow would indeed be a sharp and easy target.

As the snow hissed itself out and the weather tightened, Yeepek heard the groaning of the freezing lake. A few days more and all was silent at the lake now closed. The ducks had left. Autumn was done and save for a few clusters of frost-burnt leaves, the aspens, cottonwoods and birches were denuded of foliage, standing grimly stark. . . .

THE sun was rising to flood the lake country with dazzling effect, where heavy frost had bejeweled the meadows and lake surface. Suddenly Yeepek started. From the direction of the home yard of the man creatures a sharp sound came. It was the shrill crowing of a rooster. To Yeepek, it sounded like an enemy challenging. He gave out an answering scream, stretching his neck forward, his great bill gaped.

He rose in his great splendor, the sun now splashing his newly acquired white feathers on tail and head and neck. Banking, he planed above the farmstead, then all at once glimpsed the rooster on a fence rail.

The rooster was a big young Rock. He flapped his wings and again gave out his piercing crow. Yeepek, banked and suddenly his wings folded. He struck down on his right side like a stone.

Hens and young stock squawked in a panic at their runs as Yeepek's terrible talons struck. The rooster gave out a series of cries before those fierce talons squeezed the life from him.

The shack door slammed. Carl Winters came hurricaning out and saw the limp form of his wife's favorite rooster hanging in the talons of the eagle as Yeepek winged on to cross the lake.

It had come—the actual attack on his stock. The homesteader swore bitterly. When joined by his wife he pointed to the eagle.

"You can't see it from here, Marge," Winters said sharply, "but your prize rooster's up there too. I've got to get that heller. No wonder the Indians call him 'Satan'! He'll raise the devil with my traplines this winter, and when the lambs come next spring, there wouldn't be a safe minute with ol' Satan around. . . ."

Still grumbling, the homesteader moved back to finish his breakfast.

Far across the lake, Yeepek spat feathers from his bill. He gasped and hissed softly as he breakfasted.

Finished with his meal, Yeepek stared balefully down across his domain, suddenly to start as he glimpsed, off toward the north east, in a belt of dry tamaracs, the form of one of his kind. At once he gaped his great curved beak and spread out his wings.

Soon he was soaring up and across the frozen, snow-covered lake. Shortly he saw a beautiful young female eagle take wing and vanish from his view across the swamp. He rose and screamed a call, but there was no response. In vain Yeepek hunted for her, then returned to his eyrie to mince restlessly on his perch. . . .

HEAVY snows came, shutting up all sign of wild life below. Yeepek's hunger mounted. He scouted above the draws, hoping to catch sight of grouse, or a straying red squirrel, but without success. He struck off toward the homestead yard, but the feathered creatures there were housed against the fiercely sharp sub-zero weather which followed the big snow. . . .

In the early dusk of late afternoon, Yeepek spotted a doe and her fawn standing in a small clearing. He swooped down, striking at the younger creature. Boldly he attacked, but the doe was old,

large, and gave battle, rearing to catch him a scraping blow with a sharp forehoof. These creatures were too big for Yeepek. Hissing in his anger and frustration, he whirled away, to climb and scout further. He was almost a thousand feet up at the westerly edge of the lake when he glimpsed a familiar moving form. . . .

Below, the man creature sledded out a calf he had purchased from a distant neighbor, a calf which, because of sickness, had to be slaughtered . . .

Carl Winters was hauling out a decoy for coyotes, and Yeepek's lone eye glared savagely as his heart thumped with wild hope.

He streaked off to the shadows of a cloud haze when the man turned to take the trail back home. . . .

When all was clear, the big eagle turned and winged back to hover above the dark animal shape on the lake. Here was food aplenty, but before he dropped to attack, he rose and carefully scouted the area again for danger sign.

Then he came around and dropped, landing lightly onto the bloated side of the partly frozen creature. Suddenly his great bill was in action. He tore out a chunk of meat and bolted it, then with his powerful talons, he ripped out a slab and immediately rose.

He was cruising back toward his tamarac when a thunderclap sounded. He was thrown off balance, struck in a hind claw. His catch toppled from his grasp, but he swiftly spilled himself and expertly caught up the flesh again, soaring as the rifle crashed a second time. . . . Yeepek hissed as he heard the whine of the bullet. Soon, with seemingly little effort, he was back at his tamarac, but found difficulty in retaining his balance with a partly severed rear claw on one foot. Again the man creature had struck.

For two days Yeepek kept to his tall perch.

DAYLIGHT had scarcely dawned this morning when his one eye was quick to catch movement at the calf carcass out on the lake. Yeepek fluffed out his feathers. As he glared sharply up across the lake he gaped his bill and hissed, for out of the far tamarac zone came the other eagle.

At once Yeepek took off, heading out toward the black shape on the lake. It was not long before he identified the moving creature below as a small red fox. As Yeepek approached the little fox reared, threshing wildly, but a rear paw was caught securely in a trap.

Yeepek struck down, and shortly, under his fierce power, the fox relaxed. Yeepek seemed to feel the close presence of the stranger eagle before he actually saw her. Suddenly she came down on his blind side, threshing with her wings. He rose, whirling to slash at her. Though handicapped by the loss of an eye, he had well learned to make good use of the other. He was larger than the stranger, and beat her off, and not until Yeepek had feasted did he permit her to take his place at the kill. . . .

He was in his eyrie contentedly preening himself when the man snow-shoed across the lake to stare, wide-eyed at the damage done.

Carl Winters swore bitterly as he freed the mangled fox from the trap. The winter trapping season did not promise much, while Yeepek was still at large. As he looked about him, Winters suddenly started, glimpsing an eagle headed for the north-easterly swamp zone. He knew Yeepek's haunts and quickly realized that now there were two grim sky killers. Straightway he planned to rid the area of them.

He let the fox remains lie by the calf and at once reset his traps. He had seen Yeepek alight directly on the side of the calf carcass. Here he set two traps, and snuggled two more close to the flank of

the fox. He brought others from his home and laid them carefully. Tomorrow morning he would be out earlier. . . .

But the next morning and the next there was no sign of life at the carcasses. Yeepek, had learned sharp lessons.

HUNGER brought Yeepek at last from his high lookout perch in the tamarac swamp, hunger and the sight of the young female eagle now planing high above.

Yeepek drove straight for the carcass. The early morning was overcast, dull, with the threat of more heavy snow. As he dived, a young she-coyote creeping in on the carcass bounded away and went streaking across the lake. Yeepek hissed as he alighted alongside the calf. Swiftly his beak struck the frozen flesh.

It was the homsteader's wife, Marge Winters, who glimpsed him the next day as she strode across the yard toward her chicken run.

"Looks like a cross fox out there, Carl," she said as Winters came outside. "You'd better hurry. There's an eagle hovering about out there, too."

Winters pulled on mitens and seizing a short club started hurriedly for the lake.

He squinted across the distance and agreed with his wife. That object by the carcass certainly looked, in this dim light, like a trapped fox.

He glanced up at the sky, frowning as he glimpsed the lone eagle high up. Then suddenly, as he trotted on, he was arrested by a commotion at the carcass. He stopped short in his tracks.

"Mucha Satan!" he gasped. Flapping his great wingspread, Yeepek fought fiercely, savagely to free tail feathers from a trap he had just sprung.

Winters quivered with excitement. A low chuckle now escaped him. Better by far than even the best black fox in the country was the capture of this winged killer. . . .

He rushed in with lifted club, but Yeepek lunged forward as far as the trap chain would permit, and buffeted with his wings. Winters sprang backward, swearing when a foot sprung a fox trap. . . .

Overhead, the free eagle screamed, and now Yeepek answered her, screaming as he lunged and flapped, putting all his great power into efforts to free himself. . . . He turned to keep his one good eye on

(Continued on page 130)

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BEAUTIFUL BUT DEADLY!

By

JOHN T. LYNCH

She was deadlier than a sidewinder, but who can hang a rattler . . . or a woman as beautiful as Mona White?

MONA WHITE, during her checkered career as the darling of the dance halls in the Northern Mines region of California, had often dreamed of the day when she could settle down on a nice, quiet ranch with a young and romantic husband. She considered it a great stroke of luck, one evening in 1850, when she met Fatso Carle.

Fatso Carle proposed marriage to Mona, and Mona accepted. Fatso was far from being her ideal as a handsome lover—he was squat, ugly and greasy—but he did have a beautiful little rancho in the green and peaceful Salinas Valley. Mona had batted around enough to realize that a person can't have everything.

On arriving at her new home, Mona was highly pleased. It was exactly such a place as she had dreamed of. As time went on, she liked the rancho more and more, but she got to hating Fatso. He just didn't fit in with either the landscape or her visions of a husband. With her logical mind, she figured that she couldn't get a handsome husband if she already had a husband. So she shot-gunned Fatso.

Her beauty swayed the jury at her trial, in which she pleaded self-defense. She was acquitted. She went back to the little rancho to await her dream man.

One sunny afternoon the "dream man" came riding into the ranch yard. He was a stranger in Salinas, and Mona had never seen him before. Young, handsome and honest-looking, he lightly jumped from his horse and asked Mona for a drink of water. Mona invited him in the house, and treated him to her best wine. It was the beginning of a romance.

Although the "dream man" was one Bill Kenners, horse thief and murderer, now on the move away from the San Francisco lawmen, Mona had no idea he was a "wanted" man.

Kenners, quick to see that this was a perfect set-up for him as a permanent hideout, as well as a nice home, decided

to woo Mona in the prescribed manner. Every night, under her window, he would sing a favorite romantic refrain of the era:

Do not kill me with a pistol or a knife,
Kill me rather with thine eyes, love.
With those red lips take my life,
Do not kill me with a pistol or a knife.

After Bill Kenners felt that he had given the matter enough of a build-up, he asked Mona for her hand. She hesitated, coyly, and then accepted the handsome Kenners.

The marriage succeeded admirably for a few months. Bill often sang to her, in his delightful way, "Do not kill me with a pistol or a knife. . . ."

Although Mona had often wondered why Bill kept a loaded shotgun propped against the wall near the front door, she never questioned him about it. She was too happy to bother. But the night came when she found out, suddenly and tragically.

Shortly after midnight a sharp knock sounded on the door. Bill leaped from bed and grabbed the shotgun. He was right in sensing that the lawmen had finally tracked him down.

Bill pointed the gun at the door, then he ordered Mona—who had hastily donned a bathrobe and slippers—to open it.

As Mona pulled the door open, Bill discharged the shotgun, taking care not to hit his wife. The full blast, at such close quarters, caught the two law officers before they knew the door had flown open.

Why they had so foolishly approached the place without caution will always remain a matter for conjecture. It cost them their lives.

Bill Kenners hastily examined the two dead men, relieving them of their wallets and jewelry. Through force of habit he re-loaded the shotgun and put it back in its usual place. "Quick, Mona," he said. "Pack us some food an' things. We gotta beat it pronto! I'll go out an' saddle us a couple of horses."

Mona did some fast and practical thinking when Bill left the house to get the horses. She loved her little rancho too much to leave it. She loved Bill, too, but she could always get another husband. If she fled with Bill she would never be able to come back. And, if she left Bill go, alone, she would have to face the authorities, and explain the two dead men. They might arrest her, and take her away from the beloved rancho.

Mona already had the shotgun levelled when Bill came in the back door. She blasted away. Bill died on the spot.

Mona lost no time in riding into Salinas town where, excitedly, she told the sheriff about the killings at her rancho. She said that she had not known that Bill was a "wanted" man. She explained how, after Bill had killed the lawmen, he had threatened to kill her if she would not flee with him. "Not wanting to run away with a murderer," she said, "I watched my chance to get the shotgun. Then I had to shoot him—as any good woman would have done."

Mona's yarn was accepted without question. She became a heroine in the eyes of Salinas Valley people.

Within two months she had acquired a new husband. He was young and handsome, to be sure, and she had thoroughly checked his past. He was as good a husband as Bill had been, but not quite so romantic. For instance, he never sang to her: "Do not kill me with a pistol or a knife."

She smiled in sweet remembrance of Bill whenever she thought of that song. It comforted her to know she had not killed him with a pistol or a knife. Nor with her eyes or red lips, either. No—she had used a shotgun!

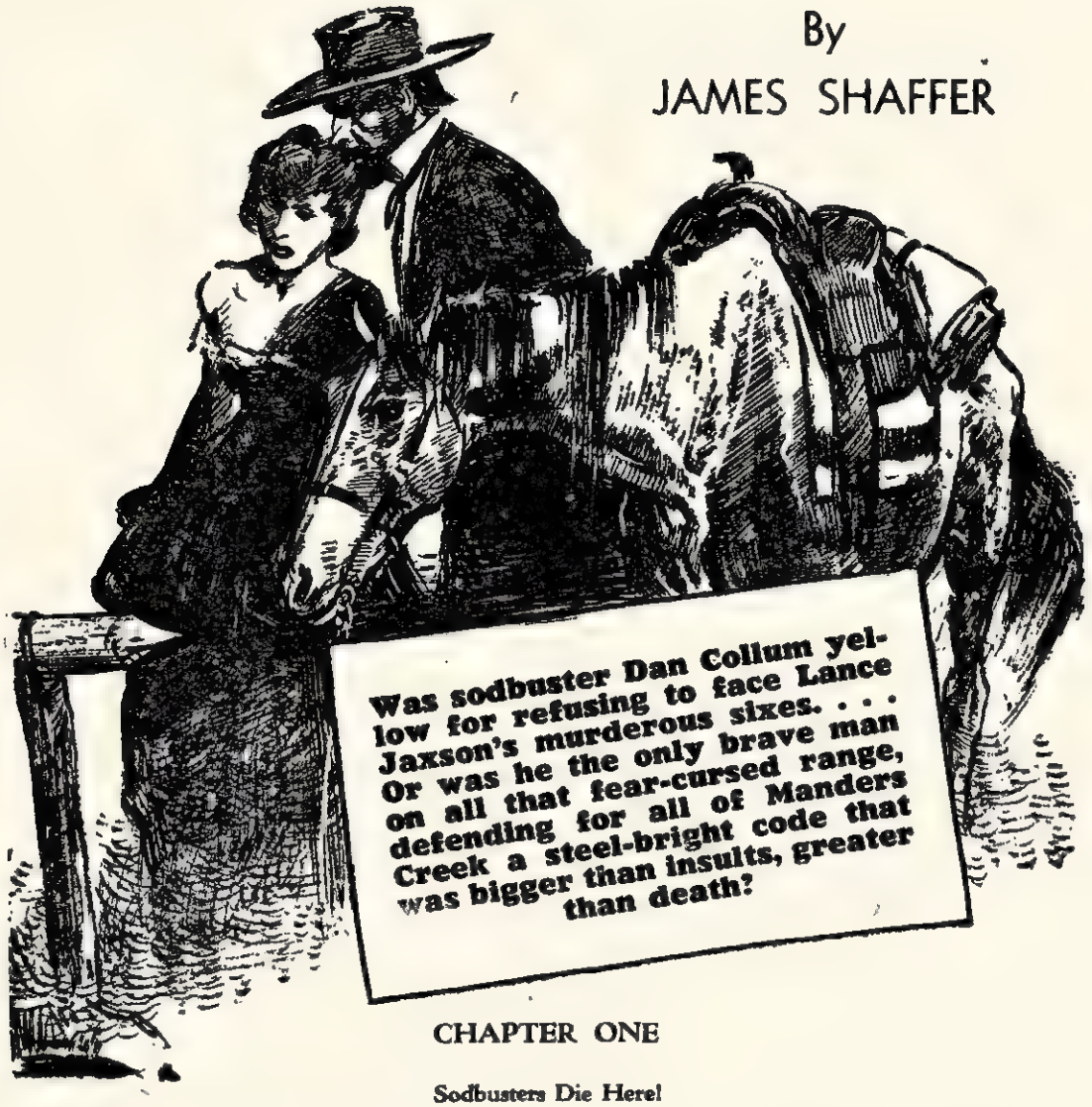
NESTERS NEED

Dan rolled desperately as he saw Wiley draw back to kick.

NINE LIVES! •

A Thrilling Western Novelette

By JAMES SHAFFER



Was sodbuster Dan Collum yellow for refusing to face Lance Jaxson's murderous sixes. . . . Or was he the only brave man on all that fear-cursed range, defending for all of Manders Creek a steel-bright code that was bigger than insults, greater than death?

CHAPTER ONE

Sodbusters Die Here!

DAN COLLUM wished now that he had passed up his glass of beer. Common sense had told him to do just that. But he'd had few relaxations since he'd taken up his homestead on Manders Creek, and he'd come to look forward to this occassional beer with pleasure.

Anyhow, he told himself, to have sidestepped Lance Jaxson today would not have solved anything; it would have only post-

poned the thing. Two months ago, Dan wasn't at all sure that Jaxson meant what he said about homesteading along the Creek. Now, he knew Jaxson wasn't bluffing.

He steeled himself to face the man, because he knew that sooner or later he would have to do it. But even so, he felt the skin on the back of his neck crawl and tighten as Jaxson walked with measured stride toward the bar.

"I told you not to plow up that land along the Creek, Collum."

Just like that, Dan thought, turning to face Jaxson. At least the man was direct. He came flat out with it; just as he would come flat out with any action.

The bar in the Drover's Hotel was a long one; the longest in town. It was the quietest liquor selling place in town, too. But Dan had never known such silence as he felt now. Jaxson had taken his place at the far end of the long bar; a good fifty feet away. Dan looked at the man. He saw a tall, well-built individual, a little on the skinny side, and almost foppishly dressed.

There was nothing foppish about Jaxson's eyes, however. They were pale blue; hard and cold. Looking into them was like looking into a thick slab of ice. Jaxson wore buckskin gloves. He had the right one off and was flicking it against his left leg. His gun was tied down; its worn bone handle shiny from use.

"The land I plowed is my own," Dan said. "It's my homestead."

"The land you plowed is on my range," Jaxson snapped. "I've been cutting hay along the Creek for ten years."

Dan looked at Jaxson, then let his gaze slide on past the man as the door of the big barroom opened. Harry Slade eased in the door and moved quietly to a corner of the room. Dan had to fight hard to keep the curl out of his lip.

The political campaign that had pinned the sheriff's badge on Harry Slade had been the most openly crooked Dan had ever encountered. Lance Jaxson had been Slade's campaign manager. Everything had been used; bribes, threats, ballot box stuffing and a deliberate miscount of the votes.

Yet there had been no grumbling about it. The townspeople of Honaker had taken the whole thing with a shrug of their shoulders and a fatalistic grin. The homesteaders had accepted Slade's victory in tight-lipped silence; even though they knew that Slade openly opposed the influx of farmers in the county. He had stated flatly that they would get little protection from him.

"The land I settled on is open to homesteading," Dan said, keeping his voice low. "If you wanted it, you should have bought it. I homesteaded it. I own it. And I plowed it."

"I told you two weeks ago there was some mistake in your papers," Jaxson said. "That your title wasn't clear. You should have waited for the title to clear before you ruined that ground."

There it was, naked and ugly. He could mumble something, turn on his heel and walk away, and hope that Jaxson would let it lay like that. But he didn't.

"If there's any mistake in my claim papers, it's because you bribed the land clerk to put it there!"

He concentrated on Jaxson. Even so, he was conscious of other things in the barroom. The sharp intake of the bartender's breath, and the shuffle of his feet as he moved away. The faint snigger from Harry Slade—these things he was conscious of, even as he watched the murderous glint grow to a flaming light in Jaxson's eyes.

"I like your damned nerve. I like it a helluva lot. Calling me a crook to my face—"

Jaxson's ungloved hand darted downward. Dan had expected the move. But he didn't make a grab for his own gun.

He knew that was expected of him, since he was wearing a gun.

Just why he continued to wear the gun —especially after the laughable exhibition he made of trying to shoot it at the fair a few months back—he didn't know. At thirty feet, he'd been unable even to hit the door that the target had been fastened to. He'd thought of discarding the gun after that, but it was the custom of the country to wear one, so he'd continued to wear it. Now that custom could easily get him killed.

HE DIDN'T reach for his gun. His mind had told him in advance that he'd never come out of a gun fight alive. So he stopped it from being a gunfight. He flung his beer mug.

It hit Jaxson in the face, and what beer was left in it splashed out. Jaxson swore and lifted his left hand to wipe the beer away. Dan Collum sprinted toward him.

The first blow wasn't hard; Dan didn't have time for that. It was just a quick, jolting stab; enough to knock the man off balance. It slowed Jaxson's draw just enough for him to deliver the second blow.

The second blow went to the stomach, and it knocked the wind out of Jaxson, doubling him up. The rancher tried to break clear. He grabbed the bar with his free hand and tried to push himself backwards; still trying to get his gun clear. Dan gave him no chance to do either.

His left hand closed over Jaxson's right wrist, imprisoning the gun in its holster. He slugged out with his right hand, hitting for the man's face. Jaxson tried to jerk away, but Dan held on. He had the man pinned against the bar, unable to move; helpless to defend himself. He swung three short punches to Jaxson's chin and felt him sag in his grip. He loosed him quickly, stepping back.

The rancher's knees buckled, his fingers clawed at the smooth surface of the bar, but could find no purchase. He slid in an inert heap to the floor, his breath wheezing in and out loudly and painfully.

"By hell, Collum!" Harry Slade's voice was high pitched with anger. Dan swung around, saw the sheriff starting across the floor with his gun half drawn.

He had no illusions about Harry Slade. Dan knew that Slade owed Jaxson everything, and Slade had just seen Jaxson beaten to the ground.

"Get 'em up!" the lawman snarled. Dan leaned against the bar, sucking in his breath. It would be wrong to try and stand up to Slade. It would be just what Slade would want. No, there must be a better way. He looked down; Jaxson was beginning to stir on the floor, a faint moan dribbling out of his bleeding mouth.

"Sure," Dan said easily, a grin he didn't feel on his face. "Sure, Slade." He put his back squarely against the bar and shoved his hands up. "I thought Jaxson was big enough to handle his own fights. That's what everybody in town told me. Looks like they were wrong. Looks like he has to sneak behind that badge of yours when the going gets rough."

"Go 'way! Leave us—" Jaxson was pushing himself erect. He turned his bloody face and stared at Slade. "I'll handle this."

Slade hesitated a moment, his cruel thin lips set in a tight line, his hand still clutching his gun butt. Then he spat three words deliberately at Dan Collum and backed away. Dan colored at the words; but kept the grin on his face and his hands high.

"All right, damn you!" Jaxson was pushing himself upward with his left hand. "Come outside—we'll settle this once and for all—you got a gun—"

"But I'm no gunfighter," Dan told him. Jaxson was on his feet then, starting for the door. At Dan's words he whirled around. His right hand started reaching again for his gun. Dan's reaction was

purely involuntary. He jumped forward, kicking high. His toes caught Jaxson's wrist and the gun went spinning in the sawdust. Jaxson snarled with pain.

"Your gun, Slade—gimme your gun!"

"Right, boss!" the sheriff snapped and almost ran over to the rancher. Dan Collum backed away. His big fingers fumbled with his belt buckle. He unsnapped it, flipped the sagging holster and cartridge belt toward a chair. Jaxson had Slade's gun by then; his face white with rage.

"Pick it up!" he rasped. Dan shook his head.

"Guns ain't my line, Jaxson. Don't know why I ever wore one in the first place. But I'm through wearing one now—"

"I'll pistol whip you till you do pick it up!" Jaxson snapped, taking a step forward. Dan lifted his fists and squared his shoulders.

"I'll give you more of these," he said curtly.

"Pick up your gun!" Jaxson choked in baffled rage. Dan saw that baffled look; and knew that it was his protection. He smiled and shook his head.

"Yellow!"

Dan colored, but fought to keep his temper. "Not yellow, Jaxson. I'll take you on any time you want—with these—" He lifted his fists again.

"Yellow!" Jaxson snarled again. "Yellow as a dog!" He motioned with the gun. "Get out! Get out of town! And stay out—till you strap a gun on!"

"I'm through wearing guns—but I'm not through coming to town when I want."

"That's up to you," Jaxson told him. But I'm killing you on sight the next time I see you—gun or no gun!"

IT WASN'T until he'd talked with Laura that he made up his mind to ignore Jaxson's threat. He'd never kept anything back from his wife, and he kept nothing back this time. It would have been useless to have tried to hide it, anyhow. She took one look at him and knew something had happened. She was fixing supper, and she didn't disturb their meal with questions. But after supper, he told her.

It was like her to show no hysteria. She picked up her basket of mending and took her accustomed chair by the open fire.

"Ella was over today. She and John will be going to town with us Saturday morning. I think it's nice that neighbors go to town together, don't you?"

He didn't reply immediately, but stared at her as she bent over her work. Then a slow smile creased his face.

"Then you're not afraid?"

"It's you that should be afraid, Jaxson threatened your life."

"In this country, it's more of a tragedy for a woman to lose her man, than it is for a man to lose his life."

"But the greatest tragedy for a woman would be to have a husband who wouldn't stand up for the things he thought right."

She bent over her work, and he stared at the top of her head, marveling at the fact that though he'd been married to her four years, he still didn't understand her.

"Even in this country," Laura went on, "they won't stand for cold-blooded murder. And that's what it would be if Jaxson had a gun and you didn't. He was just talking wild—because he was mad."

"Yes," Dan agreed. "He won't shoot until I have a gun in my hand. But he'll try every trick there is to make me pick up a gun."

"You surely won't fall for any of his tricks."

"No, but there will be those who will call me a coward, if I don't. They will make the same talk Jaxson did today. Call me yellow."

"No man is a coward who fights for the things he believes in—and fights the only

way that he knows how to fight. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Yellow Badge of Courage

JOHN and Ella Black were their nearest neighbors. They had arrived in this country together. The Black homestead was not on Manders Creek. It was four miles up a rough, rocky canyon, where John Black was trying to cultivate the sides of the canyon.

Most of the other homesteads were on just such ground as John Black had settled on. There was still plenty of land on Manders Creek, but none of the homesteaders seemed anxious to take up land there.

The Blacks arrived early Saturday morning, and John stayed outside to help Dan hitch the team up, while Ella went inside the sod shanty to talk with Laura.

"Didn't know whether you'd be going to town or not, Dan," Black said hesitantly.

"News gets around—even in this country, I see," Dan replied with a wry grin.

"Laura?" Black asked. "Does she know?"

"Ever trying keeping a secret from your wife, John?" Dan asked with a chuckle.

"They say your gun is still laying in that chair where you dropped it," Black went on seriously. "It's Jaxson's orders that it stay there until—"

"It'll be mighty rusty before I pick it up," Dan said. The two women came out, then the talk died. Dan threw a corn husk mattress in the bed of the wagon for the women to sit on, while he and John Black climbed into the spring seat.

"'Twon't take us long to do what we've got to do," Ella Black said hastily as she and Laura settled themselves. "We can be through in fifteen minutes—"

"Nonsense!" Laura said quickly. "Marshall's store got its summer stock in last week. We'll take our time looking at everything."

In spite of Dan and Laura's attempt to keep the conversation going, there was no talk as the wagon rolled into town.

Usually the cowhands didn't get to town until late Saturday afternoon, after most of the homesteaders had finished their business and left town. But this morning, they lounged along the street, their wide brimmed hats pushed back on their heads, watching silently as Dan's wagon rolled down the street.

Outwardly, Honaker seemed as it always had; a sleepy cowtown. But there was a subtle difference this morning. A tension, a coolness in the air.

A few lounging cowhands drifted down the sidewalk as Dan pulled his team to a halt. The punchers stared in open curiosity, as he climbed to the ground and helped Laura out.

"He ain't wearing one," a lanky rider stated flatly. His companion, shorter and more bowlegged, grunted sourly.

"How could he? The only one he owns is in that chair at the Drover's. He's got to go by and pick it up."

"By hell, I'd of borrowed one, was I him," the lanky one continued. "Jaxson ain't no man to play around."

John and Ella Black stood by nervously as Dan slipped the bridles off the team and pulled the feed sacks over their noses. He paid no attention to the talk of the cowhands. Neither did Laura.

Then he stiffened. It was nothing the cowhands said. It was the sudden silence. The talk among the riders dried up quickly. John Black cleared his throat loudly, and Ella Black started talking fast about nothing. Dan turned around and waited for Lance Jaxson to walk up to him.

As before, Harry Slade was with him, his ferret face flushed with anticipation.

"I told you not to come to town without a gun, Collum!"

Dan looked him over, noticing that the marks of his fists were still prominent on his face. Laura moved beside him, and the Blacks moved away.

"Didn't know there was a law in this country that made a man wear a gun," he replied tautly.

Again he saw the baffled look creep into Jaxson's eyes. It was gone in a moment, replaced by a cold, driving anger.

"It does no good to call you yellow. I tried that before." Jaxson's voice had a brittle contempt in it that stung like a whiplash.

"You're entitled to your opinion of me—just as I'm entitled to my opinion of you, Jaxson," Dan replied, bringing the corners of his lips up in a smile. "I imagine our opinions of each other are about the same."

"Your gun's where you left it," Jaxson went on. "But I suppose you're too yellow to go after it."

"Call it yellow if you like. I say different. I say I'm my own boss, and that I won't be stampeded into a gunfight."

Without turning his head, Jaxson called out sharply. "Lew!"

A BURLY rider stepped off the sidewalk across the street and swaggered over. This was Lew Wiley, one of Jaxson's riders. A hulking chunk of a man, with shoulders that threatened to break through his dirty cotton shirt, he walked with the shambling gait of a bear. He stopped by Jaxson, arms hanging loosely, dull gray eyes fastened on Dan.

"Want I should work him over, boss?"

"Give him your gun," Jaxson said.

"I could work him—"

"Give him your gun!"

Dan Collum folded his arms, and the grin tightened on his face. "It won't work, Jaxson. You can't force a man to accept something he doesn't want—"

"By hell, you'll take it if I have to hold a gun on you to make you!" There was a wild, crazy glint in the man's eyes. Dan laughed.

"That's funny reasoning, Jaxson. Hold a gun on a man—to make him accept a gun so you can kill him in cold blood! I don't think it will work!"

Lew Wiley had moved closer to Dan. He pulled up, blinking slowly and eyeing Dan steadily. Slowly, like a trained bear, he lifted his gun and shoved it forward, butt first.

"Here. It's loaded."

Dan ignored the man, turning his attention on Jaxson. "You're as big a fool as I thought, Jaxson. This whole thing is rank stupidity—"

Wiley moved. He jammed the gun back into leather and jerked forward, grabbing for Dan's arm. His big hand closed over Dan's left wrist, jerking downward, then up and back. Dan tried to shake him loose, but before he could gather his strength to resist, his left arm was twisted behind him. Lew Wiley put the pressure on, jerking his left hand toward his shoulder. A grunt of pain escaped Dan as he tried to break free. But Lew shifted with him, retaining his grip.

"Break it!" Jaxson ordered crisply. "Then break the other arm. If he won't fight, at least I'll make damn sure he doesn't plow up any more land."

Wiley applied pressure with cold, deliberate brutality. Dan felt and heard the muscles of his arm crack, and felt pain sweat break out over his body. His arm seemed to be pulling loose at the socket. He tensed against the pressure, and Wiley jabbed him in the stomach to make him loosen up.

"Stop that!" There was a rustle of skirts as Laura moved forward. She had that ridiculous little parasol, the last thing Dan had bought for her before they'd left the east. She brought it down in a chopping motion, straight for Lew Wiley's wrist. Wiley grunted with annoyance as the thing landed, and tried to twist Dan

around as a shield. But Laura followed him.

"Turn him loose!" This time she didn't strike with the parasol. She jabbed. Straight for Wiley's face. The man cursed thickly and ducked away and for a moment his grip loosened. Dan put his whole body into a wild surge and broke free from Wiley's grip.

"Don't try that again, Wiley," Dan said, as he rubbed circulation back into his left hand and arm. "Don't try that again."

"I thought I had something to worry about," Jaxson said, forcing a short, brittle laugh. "But I see I haven't. Why worry about a man that hides behind a woman's skirts!"

Dan was still nursing circulation back into his arm when he reached the post office. Laura and Ella had disappeared into Marshall's store; he and John had drifted to the post office, the gathering place of the men while they waited for their wives to finish their shopping. He paused directly in front of Ralph Dawson.

"Been meaning to ride over and see you, Ralph," Dan said. "About that fence. Marshall says he'll have some bob wire next month. We could put our order in now—"

"Changed my mind about the fence," Ralph said, glancing away. A chill went through Dan, but he kept the smile on his face.

"Must have been sudden—this change of mind," he replied. "Last week you were all for it. You know it's needed. If it's not built cattle will tromp both our crops."

Dawson brought his gaze back to Dan's face. "I figure that fence might cause trouble. There are some ranchers that oppose it. It might take a fight to keep it up. I'd want a man that wouldn't be afraid to side me in a fight with the ranchers."

A SILENCE fell over the little group. Dan let his eyes rove over them, watching each one shift uneasily as he looked at them. Their eyes were drifting up the street, and he followed their glances. Lance Jaxson was standing in the door of the Drover's Hotel. The distance was too far to make sure, but he thought he could make out the hard smile on the man's face.

I've won one fight, he thought, but I wonder if it is worth the price I'll have to pay. He was still wondering when Laura finished her shopping and came back to the wagon. She was alone.

"John and Ella?"

"They're going back with the Thomson's," Laura told him, and he saw her chin tilt a trifle. He bridled the team and climbed into the seat. Jaxson had disappeared, but Lew Wiley and Harry Slade still lounged in front of the Drover's.

"It was a mistake," he said. "A mistake to think I could change the custom of the country. A man out here has to fight for what he gets. And the weapon is a pistol—"

"Are you worried about what they're saying about you?"

"Not so much about what they're saying," he replied with a wry grin, "as what they're not saying. They won't talk to me. We're outcasts. We can't live like that."

"None of the rest had the courage to homestead on Manders Creek," Laura told him sharply. "They sidestepped trouble by taking up land they knew Jaxson cared nothing about. At least you had the courage to pick the land you wanted. In the end, they'll know that you were right—about everything."

"Such reasoning won't change things, I'm afraid. There's only one way—"

"No!" The word exploded past her lips. Then her tone softened. "You won, Dan. You had the courage to fight it your way—and you won! If you let them

change your mind, it will be admitting defeat."

"A funny kind of victory."

"Only because it takes more courage to win that kind than it does the other."

"The kind of courage a man would just as soon not be accused of having. The courage *not* to fight."

"I want your promise," Laura said gravely. "Your promise that you won't let their disapproval change your mind."

"Do you know what you're asking? Do you know that I'll be a marked man—and you the same." He shook his head. "I'll not fight him with a gun—but I think we should move on—to another state—"

"I'll not give up my home. And I'm still waiting for your promise—"

"I promise," he said quietly. "The town's opinion of me won't make me take up a gun. . . ."

The Blacks didn't come by the next week, nor did Ella make her usual midweek call. Dan saw that Laura had cleaned the house, in case the Blacks did call, but nothing was said when their usual hour of arrival came and passed. Friday night at supper he stated his plans to work on the barn the next day. Laura shook her head.

"I have eggs and butter to sell. Mr. Marshall expects them, and the butter will spoil, if I keep it too long."

"In other words, we go to town. . . ."

The cowhands were loafing on the street as they had been the week before. This surprised him at first, then the surprise gave way to apprehension. Because they wouldn't have been there, except that they expected something to happen. That suspicion was confirmed by a glance at their faces. An air of expectation hung over the whole town.

It was in the contemptuous grins of the cowhands, and the tight-lipped silence of the homesteaders as they gathered in small, silent knots on the sidewalk.

"It isn't over yet," he told Laura. "Lance Jaxson hasn't given up."

"The man is a fool," she replied. "A fool, made blind by his own hatred and arrogance."

"But reckless and mean enough not to give up," Dan said heavily. "And whatever he intends to do this time, he has already planned. I think it would be best—"

"You remember your promise?" she asked quickly and he nodded.

THEY parted at the wagon, she with her basket on her way to Marshall's store. Dan hesitated a moment, glancing up and down the street. There was no sign of Jaxson. Harry Slade was in front of the Last Chance saloon. The lawman flipped his cigarette away and turned inside. A moment later, he came out, followed by Lew Wiley. They didn't look his way, but angled down the street toward Slade's office.

The usual crowd was in front of the post office, but he remembered what had happened last week and decided not to go down there. Finally, he got back in the wagon and drove up to the feed store. He lingered over the purchase of the grain seed, not wanting to go back on the street, and still knowing that he couldn't kill much time in the feed store. Vaughan Adams, the store owner, discouraged his attempts at conversation.

"Manders Creek ought to raise a good stand of wheat," he said. "And wheat'll bring a good price this year."

"Money ain't everything—though some folks'll stoop pretty low to get it," Adams said coldly. "That'll be nine dollars cash for the seed."

"Cash? I thought my credit was good—"

"I'm willing to help a man along—if the man's willing to help himself," Adams said. "Nine dollars, Collum!"

It made him mad, and he paid it quickly and left. There was still no sign of Lance Jaxson, but the feeling of some impending action was in the air more than ever.

He loafed across the street to the Drover's Hotel bar.

He stepped inside, stopping short at the sight of Jaxson at the far end of the bar. He tensed up, waiting. But nothing happened. The buzz of talk died for a moment, then picked up again. But there was a difference. Dan fastened his eyes on Jaxson. The rancher poured himself a drink and lifted his glass. With one quick motion, he made a mock salute to Dan, then tossed the drink down. The smile broadened on his face. The flesh crawled along Dan's spine as he ordered his beer.

"Want to pick up your property?" the bartender asked, jerking his head toward the chair. Dan glanced that way, conscious that the buzz of talk had died down again.

"It's yours," he said with a glance at the gun, "in payment for the beer."

"It's worth two beers," the bartender sneered, "for curiosity value alone."

The door of the barroom banged open and Lew Wiley stomped in. The man looked drunk as he half staggered to the bar.

"She slapped me," he yelled with drunken dignity. "All I did was tell her how purty she was and she slapped me. What do you think of that?"

Dan had his beer halfway to his mouth when Wiley spoke. It was an effort to lift it the rest of the way. Because Lew Wiley wasn't drunk. Just acting.

"I'll tame her yet," Wiley went on. "She acted like she didn't like the way I acted toward her—but I could tell different—"

The barroom was very quiet now. Lew Wiley had progressed to the bar and was loudly calling for whiskey. Dan kept his eyes on his mug of beer. He didn't have to turn around to know that every eye was on him.

"She'll come around," Wiley went on. "I told 'er I'd buy her purty silk dresses —and that's a helluva lot better than that calico stuff she's wearing now."

Dan finished his beer. He forced himself to finish it slowly, to set his glass down deliberately and walk out of the barroom with an easy, measured stride. On the sidewalk he fought to keep his stride even and not break into a run, but it was hard, and he was walking as fast as he could when he turned the corner and could see his wagon.

Laura was on the seat, her absurd little parasol casting a two-bit spot of shade. She pretended not to hear when he walked up, then forced a quick smile as he stopped.

"Where'd it happen?"

"Has something happened?" she asked lightly, a little too lightly. "Whatever are you talking about?"

She forced a smile on her lips, but she couldn't keep back the look in her eyes, nor the rush of color in her cheeks.

"Did you think they'd keep it a secret from me?" he demanded harshly. "They *had* to let me know, else it wouldn't have been any use to do it in the first place!"

"It was nothing, Dan. Nothing! That drunken Lew Wiley—" she broke off in confusion.

"Wiley wasn't drunk!"

"Dan—you promised!"

"Not this, I didn't. I didn't promise anything of this kind," his voice sounded as bleak and cold as he felt.

"Don't make a mountain of it, Dan. I'm not the first woman who's been bumped by a man who's had too much to drink—"

"No amount of talk is going to change what actually happened," he said angrily, turning away. He heard her jump to the ground and run after him. She caught him just before he turned the corner.

"Not the gun, Dan. Not the gun. You promised."

"It's the only way. This town—these people—they don't understand—"

"Not the gun! That would be a victory

for Lance Jaxson. You know he planned the whole thing—"

"And he'll keep on planning more of the same," Dan said harshly. "Today was only the beginning. Today it was only words from Lew Wiley. Tomorrow—"

"Dan, listen to me!" She had hold of his arm, fighting against him as he tried to pull away. "I passed Lance Jaxson on the street before—" she broke off, then continued. "He was licked, Dan. He was whipped. It showed in his eyes. He doesn't know how to fight you—as long as you fight your way! You've got him licked if you keep on the way you've been!"

"And let him set Lew Wiley after you again?"

"He won't try it again. I know. This was his last, desperate effort. This town—won't stand for it—"

"The town? Must I let the town do it for me?"

He jerked away, turning the corner, and hearing the words that she flung after him.

"Dan, don't be a fool! Don't let Jaxson outsmart you! Listen—there's a way out. Go after the man that insulted me—not the man that paid him to do it."

CHAPTER THREE

Watch a Coward Die!

HE STARTED for the Drover's, and then saw that the scene of action had been shifted. Lew Wiley, Lance Jaxson and the others had left the Drover's and had strolled down in front of Marshall's store.

The Drover's wasn't public enough, Dan thought bitterly. The whole town couldn't see what was going on in the barroom. And Marshall's store was in the center of town. Everybody could see what happened there.

And the town was waiting to see it. Trade had stopped, people had gathered in front of stores, in doorways, watching him as he strode down the sidewalk.

Lance Jaxson stood in the center of the sidewalk, feet spread apart a little, both thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. His head was thrust forward a little, waiting for Dan to come up. Harry Slade was in the shade of Marshall's store awning, rolling a smoke. Big, hulking Lew Wiley was behind him. Dan remembered Laura's words.

". . . go after the man that insulted me, not the man that hired him."

Why not? He remembered something else Laura had said. The baffled look in Jaxson's eyes. Maybe Jaxson was licked by Dan's kind of resistance. Jaxson had gained his place in the world by killing anybody that stood in his way. The law was something he manipulated, just as he'd worked it in getting Slade elected.

And death—somebody else's death, was a legitimate act of business as far as Jaxson was concerned. And there was Jaxson, waiting.

Only Dan didn't stop at Jaxson. He brushed past him, past Slade. Wiley stared at him in a puzzled way, then started to go into Marshall's. Dan grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked him back.

"I'm going to teach you some manners, Lew—"

"He works for me, Collum!" Jaxson said sharply. "Anything you got to say to him—"

"The hell with you, Jaxson," Dan snapped, smashing his fist into Wiley's face. It rocked the big man back on his heels. His curses were thick and mumbled as they came through cascading blood and broken teeth. He snarled like an animal and rushed Dan, lowering his head like a bull.

Dan swung once, smashing his right into Wiley's face again. Wiley grunted with pain and kept coming. Dan danced back, swinging with his left—and his foot

hit something. He tried to save himself, but it was too late. He was off balance and falling. Then the voice of the man who'd tripped him spoke in his ear.

"Take 'im, Lew—go as far as you like!" There was cold triumph in Jaxson's voice as Lew Wiley charged in. Dan rolled desperately as he saw Wiley draw back to kick. He knew that if the other landed a kick in the ribs, it would only be a matter of time till he was a broken heap of pulped flesh quivering in the dust.

Lew's first kick missed, and Dan continued to roll over. He rammed into something, and there was a clatter on the plank sidewalk. He barely had time to realize that he'd knocked over a barrel of new axe handles. Axe handles—

Lew's foot grazed his ribs as he grabbed one of the handles. He swung for the man's shinbone. The handle landed solidly and Lew Wiley howled with pain.

"He's got a weapon—use your own!" Lance Jaxson yelled. It was almost uncanny how Lew Wiley responded to commands. The words were hardly out of Jaxson's mouth when Lew's big hands was diving for his gun.

Dan came erect, swinging the handle. He started to swing for Lew's wrist, then changed his mind. He swung for the head. Lew's gun was half drawn when the axe handle cracked solidly over his temple. Wiley's eyes rolled upward; his breath gagged in his throat and he slumped to the sidewalk.

For a moment there was a dead, taut silence. Dan stood over Lew, the axe handle clutched in his hand. Lew hadn't moved so much as a muscle. It was Harry Slade who broke the silence.

"That lick coulda killed him!" Slade breathed.

"Maybe it did," Jaxson said with dry humor. "Maybe you got an arrest to make—for murder, sheriff."

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"Quit trying to scare somebody," Dan Collum said with a lightness he didn't feel. "I can see him breathing from here—"

"You've still got an arrest to make, Slade," Jaxson went on. "For assault with intent to kill. An axe handle will kill a man. And Collum was swinging to kill."

"Just a minute—" Dan protested, but Harry Slade was getting to his feet, his gun already drawn, a grin splitting his narrow little face.

"You're under arrest, Collum. For assault."

THERE was a quick tap of heels on the sidewalk, as Laura hurried up. Jaxson didn't turn his head, but his eyes told Dan that he'd heard Laura coming. He smiled.

"You'll be in jail long enough, Collum, for Lew Wiley to get on with his courting, anyhow—" his let his voice trail off, leaving his words suspended—his meaning clear.

Dan looked at the faces around him, and then back to Lance Jaxson. He didn't have to be told what everyone was thinking. They'd heard Jaxson's bald insult, and they knew what Lew Wiley had done earlier—at Jaxson's orders. Then somebody put the thoughts into words.

"Might as well be in jail—for all he can look after his woman." A cowhand said softly, and it was greeted with a guffaw. Dan tossed the axe handle to the ground.

"You don't want me in jail, Jaxson. We both know that. We both know what you want of me. You've gone to all kinds of crazy, ridiculous trouble to get me to fight. You figured you had to show the town you were tough, and kill yourself a homesteader so no other homesteader would try and settle on your range."

He stopped, feeling the cold chill that trickled down his spine, sensing the cold knot that was forming in his stomach. He wondered how much of a coward he was;

if his nerve would fail him when the time came. He didn't know, and he was weary of wondering. He wanted it over with. He stepped close to Harry Slade, reaching out a hand toward the sheriff's holstered gun.

"Let's get it over with!" he barked. "I'll borrow Slade's gun, and we'll—"

"You've got your own gun—get it!" The words came out of Lance Jaxson in a torrent. He took a backward step, a quick backward step, and his hand jerked toward his gun. But he didn't draw it.

"Get your own gun!" he repeated, and there was a slight, convulsive jerk at the corner of his mouth. Dan stared at the man for the space of ten heartbeats, then shrugged.

"All right, Jaxson," he said softly, almost in a whisper. "You wait right here—I'll go get my own gun."

He walked past the man, slid his arm through Laura's and kept on going toward the Drover's.

"Dan—" Laura's voice was a thin quaver. "You promised—"

"We went over that before, dear," he said softly. "But I'm telling you, there's nothing to worry about. Nothing whatever. I haven't got time to explain, but I'm sure. I wasn't sure before. I just had a hunch. Now I'm sure—and there's nothing to worry about. Believe me!"

He stepped into the Drover's barroom—the big room with the long bar. The gun was still in the chair. He picked it up, examined it swiftly and carefully.

"It ain't been bothered—if that's what you're thinking," the bartender said.

"If not—then you'll take orders from it," Dan said and leveled it at the man. He knew by his expression that the gun was in working order. "Into the supply room—in the back," he ordered, waving the gun.

"How come? Hell, I ain't gonna—"

"I don't want you spreading the word.

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I want to surprise someone," Dan said, pushing him back. He shoved the man in the room, pulled the door shut and dropped the latch. Then he went out the back door. The backyards of the business houses were littered with trash, but Dan ran lightly over the stuff till he reached the back of Marshall's store. There was no one near the back door. Everyone was

Laura Collum

up front, craning their necks—waiting for him to come out of the Drover's. He walked on tiptoe through the store and tapped Ed Marshall on the shoulder.

"Let me by, please . . . ." Marshal jumped nervously at the sight of him, and in another instant Dan was out on the sidewalk—not ten feet from Jaxson.

The rancher, the whole crowd, had their eyes glued on the Drover's and their backs to him. Dan took three more quick steps, which brought him within four feet of Jaxson, then spoke.

"Turn around—and let's start shooting, Jaxson. . . ."

JAXSON turned. His throat swelled as a scream started out, then was choked back before it could escape. His cheeks turned ashen, his jowls quivered.

"Start shooting!" Dan barked at him. "You know I can't hit anything at any distance—but close up like this—I've got as good a chance of killing you as you have of killing me. Start shooting!"

"No!" Jaxson forced the word out—a mere whisper. "No. You were supposed to come out of the Drover's. . . ."

"At a good long range—so you could kill me at your leisure," Dan Collum said. "I should have known your character—the way you had Slade elected sheriff. You never left anything to chance. You wanted to kill a homesteader—to gain a rep as a killer that would bother homesteaders off your range—but you didn't want to take a chance. You wanted a long range shot at me—because you knew I couldn't hit anything past twenty feet."

Dan stepped forward. Jaxson's arms still hung at his sides. Dan lifted the man's gun from its holster, eared the hammer back and struck it sharply with the barrel of his own gun. The hammer cracked and fell to the ground. Dan shoved the gun back in Jaxson's holster.

"One of us has overstayed his welcome in this town, Jaxson—and it's time for that man to move on. My wife likes it here. So do I. . . ."

* * *

The wagon bumped along the rutted road towards Manders Creek. Laura sat very close and hugged his arm tightly. Neither of them spoke.

"I can't understand," he said, after a long silence, "why you took my gun back and left it in the Drover's barroom—where it was before."

"That's easy. Every man in the county drops in at the Drover's. And that gun will be a constant reminder that my husband is a fighter and a leader. That he's going to be a big man in this country some day."

"And they'll probably remember—when they look at the gun," he told her with a smile, "that it was my wife who made me take the gun off—then returned it to the Drover's."

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(Continued from page 35)

I had gone to pieces. I knew I couldn't win.

With something like a cry, I went for my guns, but Wesley was drawing faster. His .45's were in his hands before mine were clear of their holsters. The shot was like the shouting of eternity in my ears, but it was Henry Wesley who doubled and went down in a sprawling heap.

I stood for a long moment, conscious of the heavy, unfired guns in my hands. Somewhere behind me, a horse nickered. I turned to see our team, blowing and flecked with sweat, and Ma, on the seat of the buckboard, with the smoking Sharps carbine still aimed at the place where Wesley had been standing.

"Are you all right, Herb?" It was Ches Marker, sounding curiously far away. I didn't answer. I slipped my father's guns back into their holsters. There were a lot of people gathering around me, but I could think of nothing, except that Henry Wesley was dead, and a Citizens' Committee would never touch a woman, even though she had killed a man. Somehow I walked back to Ches's place, unhitched the roan, and swung into the saddle. Ma brought the team around and drove the buckboard up alongside me.

There was nothing I could say, and she understood that.

"Thanks," I managed finally. "Thanks Ma—"

She didn't answer right away. When she did, her voice was very small and tired.

"Let's get home right away," she said. "Your brother will be wondering—"

We started back, up Deadhorse Canyon, towards our small spread. The sky, I saw, was brighter than it had been for many days.

(Continued from page 43)

the hall, working the lever of the rifle which he had snatched from the floor to use on his supposed-to-be-fleeing enemy.

In the doorway he stopped, bewildered by the sight of two empty saddles. Tom stepped from hiding and poked a six gun against his spine. . . .

The quivering Phipps and the jittery Partridge came reluctantly from their cellar prison only after positive assurances that the shooting was over. Then Tom forced the sullen Metz to carry the unconscious Shorty down into the cellar. He bolted the door behind them.

Tom's package of money, untied but intact, they found in a drawer of Blinco's desk. With it were the title papers to the Rafter-A ranch. With a flourish of his pen, now that he had regained courage, Phipps promptly signed the title over to Tom.

"I hand you this with my blessing, my boy," Phipps declared gallantly. "You did an excellent job."

"Anyway, I started it," Tom grinned. "I'll ride through Grass City on my way to the HS ranch and send out the sheriff and the doctor to take charge of these hombres."

Phipps now was positively courageous.

"Partridge and I will hold down the fort until they come," he declared. "And if there's any reward for the capture of these bandits I'm going to see that you get it."

"There'll be a reward, all right," Tom grinned to himself as he swung aboard old Snapper. "And I'll collect it when I hand old Hamp back his ten thousand along with the title to the Rafter-A. 'I didn't need the money, Hamp, old friend,' I'll tell him. 'I drove a hard bargain for the title to that ranch. I'm hard-hearted Tom, that's me.' " He whistled cheerfully as he yanked on the reins.

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(Continued from page 78)

swer." He blinked, the fleeting memory vanished.

"Listen, Harry." The boy laid a hand on his arm. "Listen. He *did* answer. The only way he could. What good would writing do? He come here. We all come. And started prospecting the hills, looking for trace of Hawke's gang."

Harry tried, hard. "You all come?"

"All of us. Pa, Ma and me. We rented the farm and come. It took us years to find where the gang hid out, moving around the way they did, and always so slick about it. But we couldn't find their hideout. We camped right in their back yard. Ma died. Pa and me stuck. We figured if we couldn't find them, they might find us, and take me in, the way they did you. That's why Pa learned me to shoot like a fool."

Harry said helplessly, "I don't understand. But someday, if you'll keep tellin' me. . . ."

The boy said, "I'll keep telling you. We got to get some grub, Harry. By God, I want to start for home tonight! The farm's rented, but we can take it back again. Come on, Harry. Maybe I got to keep telling you, too, that your name's Harry Judd Bristol. You can't remember even that?"

Harry said slowly, "They beat me up around the head. I don't remember so good. I'll keep tryin', though. I remember you said you had a debt. . .?"

The boy said, "Yes. I said it." He had a vision of Hawke, the outlaw's sixgun lowered, firing a bullet through the head of a man already dead. "Forget it, boy. It's paid."

And he fingered in his pocket the thing he had picked up from the floor of his father's cabin where Black Hawke had dropped it, the lucky piece Harry had lost years ago.

NESTER FOR SALE!

(Continued from page 89)

Granite said,"You kin send them a telegram or somethin'. We want yuh here. I allus did like yuh, Clymer."

He sat on a chair and put up his foot. He managed a grin. He said, "Hell, you're a swell outfit. Like to tie up with you." They brought whiskey and he drank gratefully and the fiery liquid added to his strength. He said, "Granite, if I was you I'd sashay across the street and see that the little lady is okay. She looked sorta peaked and I thought I heard her call you. . . ."

Again the big man flushed, but he wheeled and went out of the door like a shot. Clymer drank again.

He said to Besom, "Man could find a gal like that, he'd stop ridin', wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, sir," said Besom enthusiastically. "She's just damn perfect fer Jacob; a nice, decent, gal like o' her."

"Right," said Clymer. He drank again and the pain was not so bad. In a little while it would be gone. Time took care of everything.

In a little while he could ride again. Things would be different now, though.

A little justice, a little simple justice dispensed by a strong, lucky hand . . . by lucky hands! For she had helped make her own luck when she stepped out and shot Lacey.

Courage she had, and strength, to help Jacob Granite raise a family and grow rich and powerful in the land. A good man, in a good land, with no past to plague him, no fiddle foot to make the long trail seem attractive when things got slow. . . .

Clymer would be all right, he thought. Clymer was a better man than he had been yesterday. Marshal was a good job. A man could build from a start as an honest marshal. . . .

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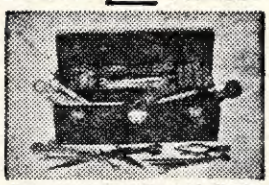
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(Continued from page 107)

the man creature who now came cautiously forward. Never had Winters seen such a demonstration of fury in a trapped creature. Never had he been so close to a bald eagle. When at last he struck, the big bird eased himself to one side, and when the man overshot, struck forward like lightning.

Winters yelled with pain as that powerful beak ripped the sleeve of his mackinaw and the flesh of his arm.

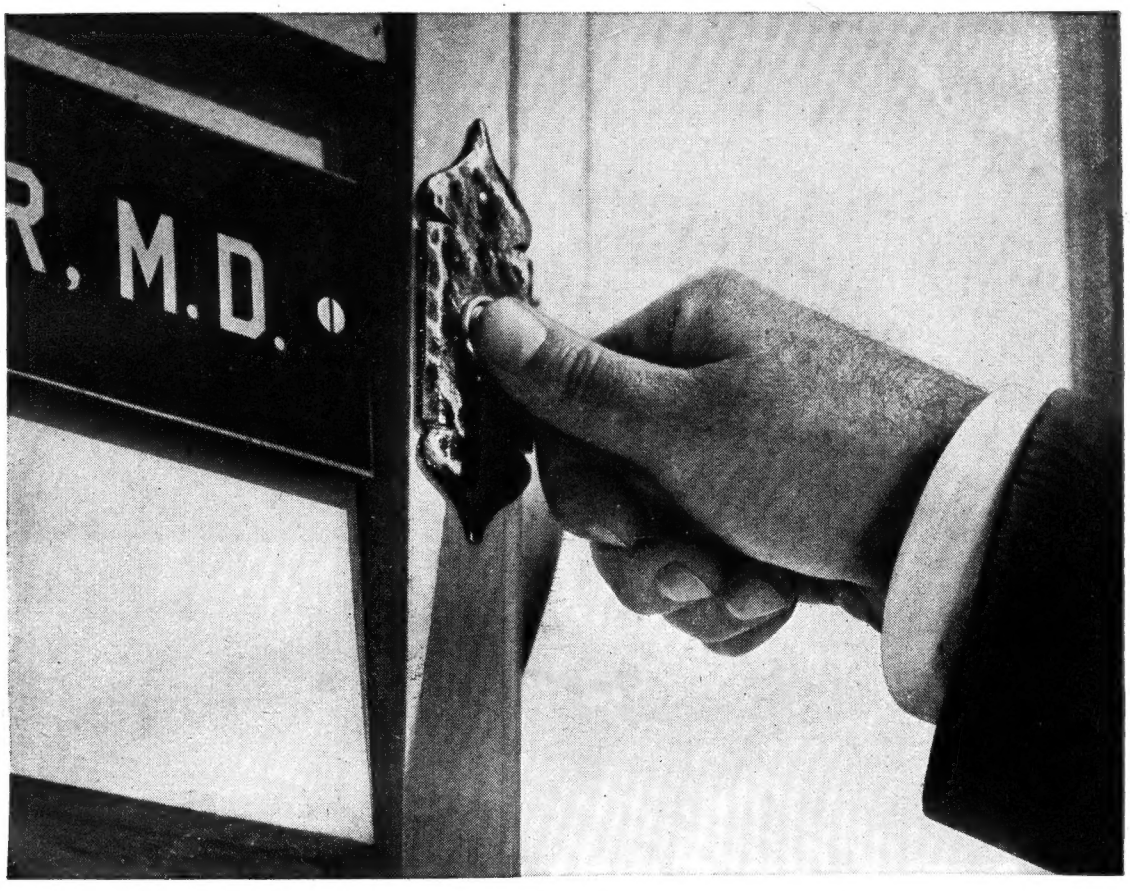
More piercing than ever now the other eagle screamed again. Yeepek seemed to recognize some tone in that scream that spurred him into a terrific final effort. As the man, now bitterly angered, whirled toward him, the club raised, he flapped his wide wings and lunged forward.

He was free, but the sudden break took him almost fully into the face of the oncoming man. Winters thrust an arm before his face. He beat furiously with his club, but a buffeting blow from a stout wing shoulder toppled him back. He was sitting in the blood-stained snow when with a terrible cry Yeepek rose. . . .

A minute or so later, swearing softly, but with deep bitterness, Winters watched the eagle pair plane about high in the sky, then wing their way onward till they disappeared.

Yeepek had found his first mate. He was following her, on from the lake country, on to the isolated swamps of the south where, before long, they would begin an eyrie. Soon Yeepek's responsibilities would increase. Perhaps one day he would lead handsome young buccaneers back over the Big Lake marshes. . . .

He gave out a sharp cry. The female, in the lead, dived, to come zooming gracefully back to altitude as Yeepek passed her to take the lead. Until the nesting period, he would continue to exercise the prerogative of kingship.



YOUR FIRST MOVE AT THE FIRST SIGN OF CANCER

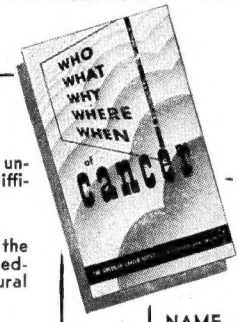
THE way to win against cancer is to discover it early—don't be afraid to learn the truth. Your doctor may give you the good news your fears are groundless. Or that a relatively simple course of treatment, in the light of new medical discoveries, is producing wonderful results in similar cases. But whatever you're told, the sooner you act, the better the news will be.

Always be on the lookout for cancer's danger signals. Watch for them in yourself, in your friends and in members of your family.

Remember—you can't *diagnose* cancer yourself, but you can *suspect* it. Be on the lookout. Check up on yourself from time to time.

CANCER'S DANGER SIGNALS

1. Any sore that does not heal, particularly about the tongue, mouth or lips.
2. A painless lump or thickening, especially in the breast, lip or tongue.
3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart, mole or birthmark.
4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings.
7. Any change in the normal bowel habits.



MAIL COUPON FOR FREE BOOKLET THAT TELLS THE FACTS ABOUT CANCER

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY
47 Beaver St., New York 4, N. Y.

Please send me free the booklet containing vital information about cancer.

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